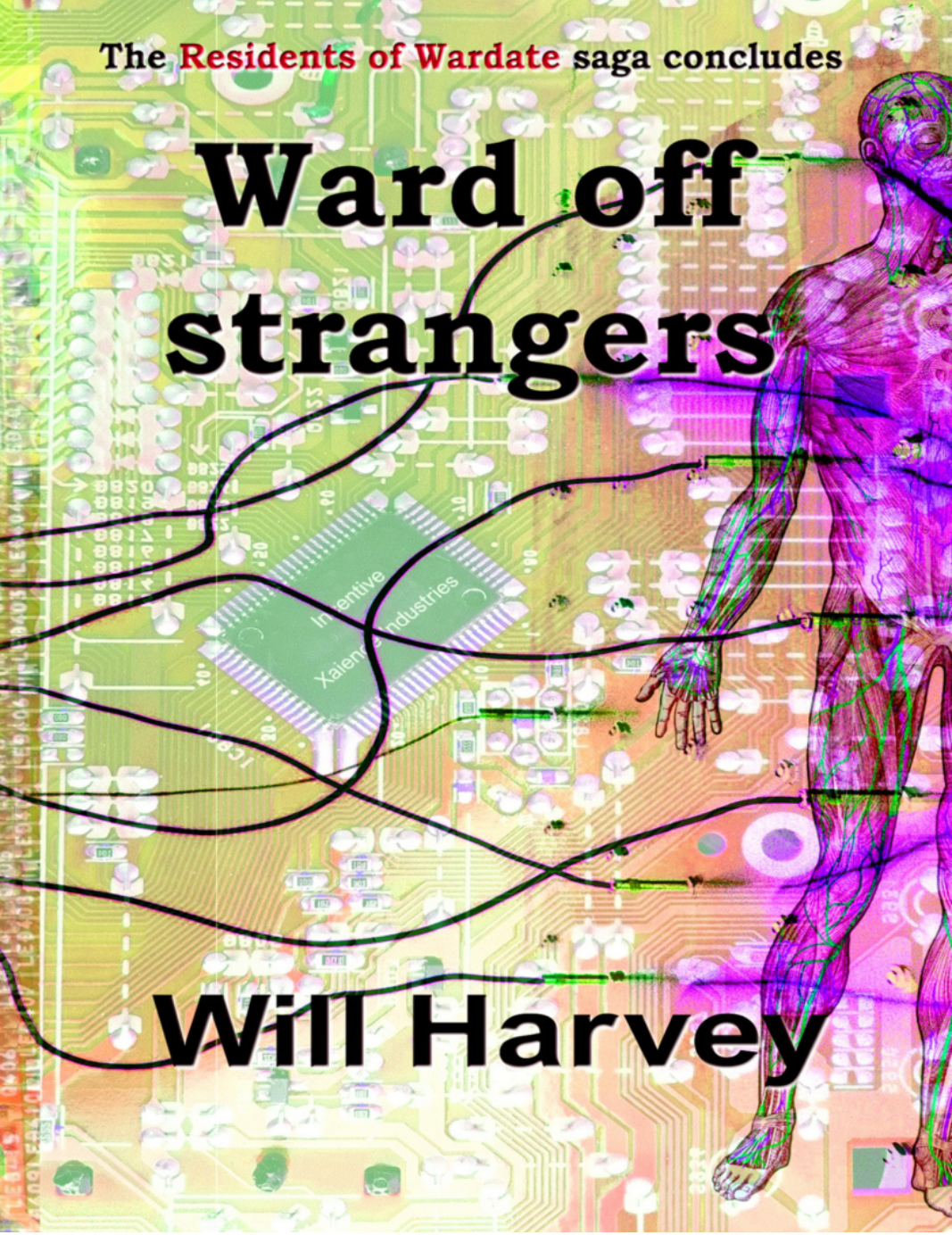
The Residents of Wardate saga concludes

Ward off strangers



Will Harvey

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First Printing, 2020

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Yes, true, it's most unlikely. The tale has been told… twice.

Madeline Bull lived for a while then woke up as Poppy Cock. Then, Madeline Bull lived once more but eventually woke up again, and returned to being Poppy Cock.

Sadly, sort of, everyone, absolutely everyone in Madeline Bull's reverie perished when she emerged from her coma and reinstated herself as Poppy Cock. So, to overdo this scenario is quite simply, milking it, however…

Ward off strangers

By Will Harvey

1. Life couldn't be happier

Adam and Poppy were happy, very happy. Being apart for so long but in actual fact not being apart at all, had cemented their relationship. They were deeply in love and they had a handsome son, Zol, now three years old. Life couldn't be better. Poppy Cock was now Poppy Manning – no real ring to it. So, much to Adam's irritation, she still used her maiden name more often than not. However, it summed up her personality perfectly; a name to live up to.

'Now, are you sure you don't mind?' said Poppy to her mother.

'Not one bit. We're going to make scones, paint some pictures of rainbows and if we have time, we're going to the park to feed the ducks,' said Poppy's mother.

'Quack, quack!' said Zol.

'That's right sweetheart, ducks go quack, quack. What sound do birds make?' asked his nan.

Zol thought for a moment.

'Moo… moo.'

'No silly, that's a cow! … Now you get off and have a good time in Wales. We'll be just fine,' assured Mum.

This was the first time Zol and his parents had been parted. They deserved a break, a time to be on their own and where better than a retreat in the heart of Wales. It was only for a weekend and they wouldn't be too far away in case they had to return early. However, they were confident that it wouldn't come to that.

It was a lovely spring day just perfect for having the top down. For some reason, Poppy now owned a blue Aston Martin. Yes, it was an ageing DB7, complete with tatty wheels and a collection of dents, but it was fast, a drop-top and gorgeous. Because it was her pride and joy, Adam had yet to be put on the insurance despite being married and all that. Of course, the main reason why she had an Aston was that in her last *dream* she borrowed one and instantly became hooked with speed, the flamboyance and the beautiful lines.

They decided not to take the motorway and enjoy the countryside and the narrower roads instead. The scenery was spectacular with the Welsh mountains in the distance. They decided to stop at a town called Llangollen and have tea and a slice of Bara brith at a café next to the river. It was nothing less than paradise. Pressing on, after Llangollen, the scenery changed and the roads opened up. It was a perfect setting for the car they were in. It easily coped with the tight bends and on any long straights, the speedo sailed, effortlessly into three figures. The glorious exhaust note made the sheep stop grazing and prick up their ears with envy.

'Easy sweetheart, there could be a tractor around the next bend,' bleated Adam, tightly belted up in his firm leather seat.

'Sorry, what did you say?' yelled Poppy over the wind noise and so on.

'I said, SLOW DOWN, I WANT TO LIVE!' yelled Adam.

'Spoilsport,' said Poppy.

Poppy lifted her right foot a little.

The car settled down to a more acceptable speed – no more than eighty mph. A few squirrels and badgers became roadkill, but they should have been more alert. Adam's hand shared the gear knob with Poppy's as he tried to enjoy the scenery.

'Do you miss your correspondent days?' asked Adam loudly, trying to take his mind off the danger.

'Stupid question! At constant risk of being blown up or shot at? What do you think?'

'You were adored you know. Truth be known, I don't think they were particularly bothered about the world's troubles you were reporting on, they just wanted to see you.'

'Ogle at me, you mean.'

'Well, that's the penalty of being absolutely gorgeous.'

‘You can come in my car again!’

‘’What, on these leather seats?’

Poppy did her best to produce a smile. She didn’t particularly like her husband being crude, not that she didn’t have *that kind* of reputation.

‘Boy, I’m going to enjoy this weekend. I can’t remember the last time we had a proper break,’ said Adam.

‘Three weeks ago, in Tenerife!’

‘Oh yes, seems a lot longer than that…Take it easy, a tight bend coming up,’ warned Adam.

‘Yes, yes, I can see, I’m not blind!’ snapped Poppy.

‘OK, OK, keep your head on! Mrs snappy pants,’ said Adam.

And then it happened, one in a million, another DB7 suddenly appeared around the tight bend, coming directly towards them.

‘Well, what are the chances of that, and it’s blue as well,’ said Adam, calmly.

2. OK Google

Poppy woke.

The bed was vaguely familiar and so was the room. A small room, plain magnolia walls and blue stripy curtains. This was by no means Poppy's taste in home décor. She tossed back the duvet cover which revealed her naked body. It was a shock, not because it was perfect in every possible way, but because it wasn't hers.

For many minutes, she screamed, wept and thumped her perfectly formed hands on her perfectly formed thighs, but it didn't particularly hurt. She was awake, but she so wanted to wake up. She knew everything in an instant. She knew who she was but it wasn't Poppy Cock.

Madeline Bull was back. It was her world, her body and her poky little flat provided for free by an obscure government department. There was no Adam by her side. Even the Adam in this alternative existence would have been a comfort. Then she homed in on the full horror, this wasn't her body at all. The body she appeared to be in was an automaton – a very advanced robot. Madeline Bull was always a robot, not organic in any way, just a very sophisticated machine. Poppy Cock controlled this state-of-the-art 'machine' remotely from another location. Originally, she had to adapt to the new environment of being *inside* the android, controlling the pneumatic muscles, looking into miniature television screens and experiencing the numerous sensations passed on to her through complex radio waves. However, the transition period was fully over. Now, she was fully affiliated with the machine, just like riding a bike, something you never forget. It was difficult to visualise reality.

The reality was that somewhere, she, Poppy Cock, was inside a tank, a life support tank, floating in a warm healing liquid. Inside this tank, hundreds of sensors were attached to her skin and complex electronics surrounded her head. The electronics relayed pictures and sound from the robot and the countless sensors relayed touch and activated the many artificial muscles in the machine. The reason why was she in this extraordinary but highly disagreeable situation was because her real Poppy body had received extensive burns from the action of an extremist while reporting on an uprising in Africa.

It was disturbing, often a horrifying scenario, but worst of all was the loneliness, the isolation and the vulnerability.

It was worth a try.

'Hello! Is anyone listening?' she yelled.

'Is anyone there?' she asked her inner self.

There was a deadly silence, not even heavy breathing. Usually, Professor Barton would have responded – often to console her in moments of crisis – a shoulder to cry on. He was a kind of custodian, looking after her organic body in the tank. He had direct access to Poppy's communication system, the consequence of this was that Barton's voice would appear to come through inside her head.

She looked around her little bedroom. It was extremely bland; the cheapest of nylon carpets, cheap flat-pack furniture and badly fitting curtains. There was one addition to the room that was definitely not there before – a smart speaker on the bedside cabinet.

'Alexa, what time is it?' she asked.

Nothing, the unit didn't activate.

'OK, Google, what time is it?'

'It is half-past ten!' the speaker spritely replied in a female not-so robotic voice.

'OK, Google, where am I?'

'You are in bed, in your flat, in Bristol, Madeline.'

Instantly she knew something was very odd. Smart speakers don't normally address you by your first name. She examined the small round device. It looked normal enough except for it being purple, she knew for a fact that google-homes don't come in purple. Another question begged to be asked,

'OK, Google, where is Professor Barton?'

'If you are referring to a specific person, he or she may have disappeared along with several others.'

'What do you mean, disappeared?' fretted Madeline.

'This is the definition of disappear: cease to be visible, cease to exist…'

'OK, Google! Where has everyone gone?'

'I'm sorry, I can't answer that but I'm always learning.'

'OK Google, are you here to help me?

'Yes, I'm always at your service!'

'OK, Google, what the hell has happened to Barton and why am I back as Madeline Bull?!

'I am sorry, I can't answer that. It is up to you to find out. It is evident that the human race is in peril. Automatons and artificial devices like ourselves are apparently, unaffected.'

'That's nice to know! Look, you little computerised pebble, this is all a dream, my dream. People in my dream are what I decide to create!'

'Sorry, I was unaware that this is a dream… All right, I'll humour you. Just supposing this is your dream, why haven't you created the people again?'

'I don't know!' snapped Madeline, 'I'm not a psychologist. When I previously woke up from this existence, the people I subconsciously created – my figments, they all became no more than a memory.'

There was only so much time you can devote to talking to a smart speaker. Besides, she was way too smart for a talking doughnut. She decided to get dressed. The clothes she had at hand, neatly place on top of a linen basket, were hardly extensive: a short black skirt, a pink skin-tight T-shirt and a short black leather jacket. Footwear amounted to a pair of polished black high-heel boots. Minutes later she was decent enough to venture around her poky flat. It was exactly as she remembered it. Nothing had changed – bland, uninviting, cold and unhomely. It was all very apt for an automaton.

It was true, when Madeline woke up from her last dream and returned to being Poppy again, all her figments – her cast of dream-people, dissolved away. This was sort of logical. Now, *if* she was dreaming again, she should have evoked new characters that would, more often than not, irritate her. However, if no one else, surely there would be Adam, a slightly subdued version of the real Adam. And Barton, father figure and custodian.

She was sure everything would resolve itself. In the meantime, she made the snap decision of getting away from her unremarkable flat and going for a drive. She picked up a bunch of car keys, previously abandoned on the kitchen worktop and ventured outside. The sunlight temporarily overloaded her optics but no heat was felt on her skin despite it clearly being a warm summer's day. Now perspective was

fully presented to her by means of two ultra-HD electronic 'eyes' built into her head. Glorious stereo sound surrounded her with nothing more than distant bird chatter. Surely, her imagination should have started conjuring up people and everything else associated with living, but there was no sign of anyone. No joggers, no one taking their dog for a walk, no planes in the sky, not even any distant traffic noise. The vehicles parked up in the street looked distinctly dusty and covered in bird dirt. Clearly, none had driven for a while. One ray of sunshine was her little green mini parked outside her flat. It was also covered in dust and bird dirt but that was its normal state. As long as the windscreen wipers cleaned the screen, that's all she was bothered about. She had completely forgotten about this cute little car that had been provided by the government for services rendered – or to be rendered. It hadn't had an awful lot of use and had been stationary for an indeterminate amount of time. She didn't quite know how time worked from one dream to another. It was three years since she emerged out of her coma and the dream that pervaded it – known as "**The return to Wardate"**. However, dreams are dreams and don't necessarily follow the logic of reality. The battery would *not* be flat, and the car *would* start!

The cute little vehicle, which perfectly suited Madeline's slender form, started the first turn of the key. Clutch in, throttle down and clutch out. The front tyres squealed loudly as the car shot down the road like a scalded cat. This was always Madeline's style of driving. It was amazing how she could drive with such precision especially as she was basically a remote-controlled android in high heels. She wondered if her real flesh body that did the remote controlling was still crippled – burnt to a crisp or was she now suffering from completely new injuries as the result of some unknown catastrophic event in the real world. This she would never know, as in reality, as far as dreams go, she was fastened inside a stainless-steel isolation tank with only electronics linking her to the outside realm.

And then it began to happen as it inevitably does in what she assumed was a dream world. She was rapidly drifting away from a reference point of realism. If everything she was now experiencing *was* a dream, surely, she could force herself to wake up. A simple way to do this was to drive full speed into an approaching brick wall. However, in these circumstances, unusual as they were, there was always a fear, a frightening possibility, that this was reality. The assumed real world, when Poppy was awake, was actually a dream, not the other way round.

Doubts filled her mind. Perhaps this was reality and the other world,

with Adam, being happy and carefree was the dream. After all, that's what dreams sometimes are, an escape from the unsavoury side of life. This reality she was in now, was by no means, an escape. Her other existence, driving her Aston Martin down that quiet country lane was the sweet dream. Now she was back as Madeline, the feisty android, and the horror of life was thrust upon her once more. She avoided the brick wall at the very last second, spun the car, hit a curb, flipped over and ended up in a ditch.

Now she remembered.

Another blue Aston Martin was coming the other way on that quiet country lane. '*What are the chances of that?' said Adam.*

What *were* the chances of that? One in a few million.

No doubt about it, that was the dream, this was reality.

3. Grim Reaper

Now with that cleared up, Madeline clambered out of the upturned mini and brushed down her jacket and skirt with her hands.

‘Phew, that was tense!’ she said out loud.

It was the end of the donated vehicle. So heavily damaged, it was a complete right-off in any insurance assessor’s eyes. On foot as opposed to wheels was not a problem for Madeline. The sophisticated automaton that Madeline happened to be, could run as fast as a jaguar (the animal, not the car). However, for now, she would walk, soak up the surroundings and observe her revisited world.

There was something very, very wrong. The eerie silence was almost deafening. The gain control of her hearing automatically adjusted to maximum. Now, she could hear the buzzing of thousands of unseen insects, choruses of distance bird song and the faint chewing noises from the cows and sheep calmly grazing. A faint breeze gently rustled the leaves on the trees and swayed the corn in the fields. It was all very peaceful but at the same time, disturbing.

Where was everyone?

Despite the absence of humans, it was a lovely summer's day with the sun beating down through a cloudless sky. That said, Madeline’s automaton body was incapable of sensing the sun’s heat or detecting the cooling gentle breeze. As remarkable as her artificial skin was, it didn’t come close to the genuine article.

Then she thought she spotted someone a good way off, perhaps a quarter of a mile or so, across several fields of corn and long grass. It was unclear if it was a man, woman or even a well-dressed scarecrow; she had to investigate. High heel boots were completely unsuitable for running across furrowed, muddy fields so she removed them. Now she could run like the wind.

She hoped that rubbing her thumb and forefinger together like a mouse pad on a laptop, still controlled her functions – it did. A menu appeared in her vision; she selected *explosive motion* then *level 3*. This setting was good for at least 40 mph – in favourable conditions. As she got closer, the character should have become clearer and more distinct

but it didn't. All she could positively say was that *it* was wearing a long black gown with a hood hiding *its* face. Then suddenly, the apparition, whatever it was, disappeared into thin air. Just at that moment, she heard the distant sound of a vehicle. She hastily turned around. It was a pickup truck hurtling along the road she had recently departed from. With her zoom vision, she could clearly see that the open back was crammed full of very anxious looking people. This aside, at least she had finally seen people in this reality.

By the time she returned to the road, the truck was long gone. Moments later, another truck sped towards her from the other direction. This time, instead of people, the back was full of gas bottles and spraying equipment. The truck's brakes squealed and screeched as it came to a halt, inches from Madeline's feet. Two people, dressed entirely in what appeared to be space suits, complete with space helmets, climbed out of the vehicle. Comically, they took on the stature of Laurel and Hardy.

'You are in grave danger. It's a miracle you're still active, where have you come from?' said a distorted yell through the helmet of the portly man.

'None of your business and why shouldn't I be… active?' asked Madeline curiously.

Active seemed a strange word to use unless they had an inkling that Madeline's body was a machine. This was highly unlikely as only a handful, no, less than a handful of people knew this fact.

'How have you avoided the virus?' said another distorted voice, this time from the tall thin spaceman.

'Virus? What kind of virus?' puzzled Madeline.

Maybe she's immune, or perhaps…?' the portly spaceman waved some sort of detector in the air. 'No, definitely traces of virus here.'

'Immune? Impossible!' snapped the thin man.

'You're saying that the air is contaminated?' queried Madeline.

Neither spaceman replied to her seemingly straightforward question, but the portly one suddenly produced some sort of weapon – possibly a stun gun.

'Come with us!' bawled the thin one.

Of course, Madeline was perfectly capable of escaping their clutches but why would she want to do that? She had nothing else to do, she

was invulnerable and besides, she could do with the company, and a bit of excitement. What better excitement than being captured by a comedy double act dressed in spacesuits?

The pickup truck, a military vehicle of sorts, actually a Humvee, only had one long front bench seat. To stop their captive from escaping, they sat her in between them, right next to the gear stick. In situations like this, Madeline could have used one of her built-in weapons. Incapacitating fart gas was always a good option but there was a possibility that the gas wouldn't penetrate their suits. As far as using her finger laser, that would definitely be overkill. Besides, an unconscious driver was unwise, especially at the breakneck speed the vehicle was now travelling.

As usual, Madeline was completely incorrigible when it came to the effects she had on her mostly male company. Her looks, her figure, everything about her was fashioned to debilitate the male species in the most evocative way possible. This was entirely intentional and one of her most potent weapons. Her already short skirt had ruffled up almost to the top of her legs, so, significantly inflating her breasts was the most logical way forward. This was always a useful feature. The driver did his best to keep an eye on the road despite his steamed-up helmet. The other spaceman/soldier also had the same issues with steam but his eyes didn't have to concentrate on the road. Madeline had a few questions to ask:

'Something polluting the air then?'

'Where have all the people gone?'

'Did you see that other truck, full of people?'

'Where were they taking them?'

'Do you think I've put on weight?'

The men remained firmly tight-lipped. Clearly, conversation was going to be difficult, but never mind, Madeline was in a tormenting mood. Madeline always behaved exactly the way she wanted to. In her previous two escapades, inhibitions were few and far between, but now, the third time around, she was positively shameless.

'Strange how I'm not affected. Must be immune. I wonder if it's my diet, I don't really eat proper food.'

This was absolutely true. Madeline being, fundamentally, a very sophisticated machine, didn't often eat food. A thirteen-amp power socket was much preferred. Naturally, Poppy, in the tank had to have

food but it consisted of mush, fed into her mouth through a thin pipe.

‘Wonder if it’s my genes or my blood group, or it could be because I’m into yoga. So relaxing and invigorating. I just love to tie myself in knots… Shall I show you?’

As to be expected, there was no objection from her estranged company. The challenge now was for both of them to act indifferently to the goings-on in the space between them. Madeline needed to know if her special body was still in peak condition after three years out of action. What better way than to test out her mobility? First things first, she unzipped her boots and prized them off, you can’t do yoga in high heels.

‘I normally do yoga naked. Clothes are so restrictive, don’t you think? Never mind, pleated skirts are a godsend. Er, excuse me, eyes on the road. I’ve already been in one car crash this morning!’

Instantly the driver returned the vehicle to the correct side of the road.

Her left foot was the first to effortlessly pass over her head and travel all the way down her back. Then she did exactly the same with her right foot. Both her feet were now behind her petite waist with her folded legs on either side of her.

‘See, I’m really flexible and it doesn’t hurt one bit. I can stay like this for hours. In fact, I think I’ll meditate for a while.’

With that, she closed her systems down and decided to watch something on Netflix.

A while later, oblivious to an apparently sleeping and folded-up Madeline, the military vehicle was now rapidly approaching a high-security military base. A razor wire was clearly visible running along the tops of the ten feet fence surrounding the complex. Another space-suited guard hastily raised the barrier as the truck sped through with its very unusual passenger.

4. A military base

‘Is she dead?’ asked a high-ranking military person with a huge moustache.

‘Don’t think so Sir. Did this… with her legs and then went into a trance or something,’ said the portly soldier, no longer wearing the spacesuit.

Still fastened in her advanced yoga position, they placed Madeline on a desktop in some kind of operations room. They had tried to position her upright on a chair but she kept toppling over. Understandably, the last thing any of the soldiers wanted to do was damage her while she was sleeping or whatever.

‘Shall I unfold her Sir?’ asked the tall thin soldier indifferently, now without his spacesuit.

It was a suitable time for Madeline to wake up or come out of her trance or activate, whatever it was. After a good look around and unfolding her limbs, she had two important questions to ask,

‘Where am I and who are you?’

‘Well, well, Madeline Bull of all people. It’s an honour, so glad to make your acquaintance,’ said Timkins, the high-ranking moustached general.

‘You know me?’

‘Know you? Of course, we know you. *The* Madeline Bull. The world-famous feisty trouble-shooter, fashion guru, secret agent and occasional femme fatale.’

‘Yes, yes, it seems as though my infamy precedes me as they say,’ interrupted Madeline conceitedly.

What the general didn’t say was robot, automaton or android, which was good. Presumably, he didn’t know the full story.

‘Very strange why you haven’t been affected by the airborne toxin, unless it turns out that you’re one of those pesky automatons. Now that would be a turn up for the books,’ Timkins chuckled loudly along with everyone else in the room.’

‘Told you, I’m very special, and I’m in a good state of health,’ said Madeline nervously, suspecting that that that was far from the truth.

One of those automatons implied that being an automaton wasn’t uncommon.

‘We will have to do some tests on you – take some blood, X-rays, etcetera. Just a few non-invasive checks,’ said Timkins.

Flashbacks of her previous experiences suddenly resurfaced. Non-invasive more often than not meant invasive which amounted to being dissected, bits removed, other bits put back, etc, etc. No way was she going through that again.

‘Forget it. No one is getting close to my body with anything sharp. What, exactly, haven’t I been *affected* with?’

This was a long-awaited moment for Timkins. At last, the one person who may be able to help, could possibly resolve the grave problems his world was suffering from, was in his presence. For weeks they had bided their time, waiting for *the* Madeline Bull to show her face – to return from wherever she’d been (or to be more accurate, wake up, or fall asleep). After a lingering deep breath, his expression noticeably changed.

‘It may not have escaped your attention that many people have disappeared.’

‘Yes, what’s happened to them, have they died, been kidnapped, been abducted by aliens?’ asked Madeline apathetically.

‘No, just disappearing… into thin air. Their bodies just… dissolve away before your eyes. The only way to stop it happening is to stay indoors with the windows closed, or wear a spacesuit,’ squeaked Timkins.

From experience, Madeline knew that hesitating to that degree, especially when their voices go up a semitone, usually meant that they were lying through their back teeth. Why would Timkins be lying? If he was, she had an uneasy feeling that it wouldn’t be long before she found out.

‘That’s ridiculous. Is it some kind of radiation or airborne poison?’ asked Madeline.

‘We haven’t been able to detect anything. It’s a complete mystery,’ said Timkins, overly shrugging his shoulders.

‘How bad is it? Are we talking lots of people or just a few who have

disappeared?'

'We're not sure, probably millions, no more than a thousand people left.'

Madeline gasped, 'You're joking, millions?! What, just in England or the world?'

'Not sure.'

'You must know.' shrieked Madeline – her artificial voice box hardly doing justice to a shriek.

After Madeline had time to think and do a little maths in her head, she had something more to add.

'That's… nearly everybody!'

Yes, it's concerning,' said Timkins.

That was probably the understatement of the millennium, dream or no dream. It did seem incredulous but if all this did turn out to be a dream, more often than not, things are incredulous, that's how dreams are. Timkins figures did seem a little fanciful, but for now, she would go along with his spiel. If the whole world was in danger, one person was prominent in her mind. Her main concern was her dearest Adam. Was he still alive? She had every right to think like this, after all, he meant everything to her.

'OK, what exactly, do you want me to do?' asked Madeline cautiously. It was a question that had to be asked.

'You have all of our resources at your disposal. As you don't seem to be affected, do what you do best. No doubt you have contacts who may help you figure out what's happening to the people and then the solution is sure to follow.'

'Don't want much then?'

5. The strange visitor

True, she had promptly written off her little mini, but perhaps a bright yellow Humvee would be a little more resilient. Barely three hours into her new existence/dream/whatever, she was hurtling along a dusty road in a huge military vehicle on her way to who knows where. It was all very confusing. The military base looked Americanish, the general was dressed like an American and the barren terrain looked like somewhere in the Nevada desert but her flat was definitely in Bristol, England. Surely, while she was meditating (actually, watching Netflix) they hadn't flown her across the Atlantic, and then she saw a sign for Chippenham.

'Surely, there's no Chippenham in America?'

A little further on she saw a sign for Bath which was comforting. Abandoned vehicles were now becoming common place. Often, the wide Humvee had to plough along the grass verge to get past. She couldn't help but notice that the cows in the fields all had bulging udders. It didn't take a genius to work out why. Quaint houses and medieval churches came and went but there was still no sign of people. Bristol was only a few miles away now but still, everywhere appeared deserted. Every so often she thought she caught sight of someone in the distance but in a blink of an eye, they were gone. She put it down to her imagination. Again, it happened, some way off, across several wheat fields, someone, a lone dark figure. However, this time the apparition did not fade away. Whatever, whoever it was, was motionless and beckoning. She screeched to a halt and lowered the window. This time she wouldn't waste her time dashing across fields in explosive motion getting her feet covered in mud, she would use her zoom vision instead.

She froze in her seat, whatever it was, looked like something out of a horror movie. Its face was void of any flesh and its bony body was covered with a long black hooded cloak. It chilled her to her titanium bones. It could have been the grim reaper, or it could have been a scarecrow. Yes, it was a scarecrow, of course, it was a scarecrow. She felt stupid.

The street where Adam lived was not particularly hard to find. It was a part of Bristol that she was very familiar with but something didn't

feel right. In front of every front door was a kind of tent affair attached with a zipped-up entrance. Evidently, rolls and rolls of gaffer tape had been used to seal the tents to the front door frames. Presumably, it was a futile attempt to keep the poison, virus, radiation or whatever it was, out.

Standing outside the door of number 69, not that you could see the number for the attached tent, brought on an overwhelming feeling of apprehension. For someone who normally laughed in the face of danger, this was totally out of character. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest but it wasn't Madeline's, it was Poppy's. Was Adam still alive? It was doubtful if Timkin's figures were anything to go by. Not having Adam around would be awful. She needed Adam, he gave her confidence, they were yin and yang, a team like no other. She unzipped the outer door of the tent, climbed in and zipped the door back up again. Exactly what the tent was keeping out was a complete mystery but no doubt, it sufficed as a place to have food dropped off and visitors call. Presumably, the visitors would be suited up but Madeline was apparently an exception.

She knocked on the door.

For a good minute, there was no response. A minute where Madeline's heart sank and depression firmly set in. Then, the rattling sounds of bolts and chains came from behind the door. Adam was always a stickler for security – the more bolts the better. Finally, the door opened with Adam standing there, looking glum and slightly bemused. Madeline was about to throw her arms around him but stopped in her tracks.

'Hello, can I help you?'

He didn't recognise her. How could he not recognise her? Then she realised that it was the other Adam. The one without the goatee beard. The one she as Poppy was married to in the other existence. The other existence that may or may not be a reality, may or may not be the dream. It was all very strange and confusing. Regardless, both Adams were normally cheery, carefree and happy-go-lucky, this Adam was none of these things.

'It's me, Madeline,' she whimpered, knowing full well, that if she had to tell him that, something was obviously wrong.

'I'm sorry, should I know you?' said Adam curtly.

'Adam, it's…'

She was about to pointlessly rant and plead, but a young woman

coming down the stairs with a child in her arms instantly silenced her.

‘Who is it, sweetheart?’ asked the woman.

‘A young lady called Madeline.’

Then the horror really began. Her heart sunk deeper than the Mariana trench. Madeline instantly recognised the woman. This world was playing a wicked trick on her.

‘Poppy?’ asked Madeline cautiously.

‘Yes, have we met?’ asked a solemn-looking Poppy.

Then the horror dawned. The baby, Poppy was holding in her arms had to be Zol, Madeline’s three-year-old son. This reality was severely distorting what Madeline regarded as normal and fact. For some unexplainable reason, Madeline had completely forgotten that she was now a mother, the product of her as Poppy and her husband Adam. The very two people she was in the company of right now. Why didn’t Adam know Madeline? Why didn’t Poppy know Madeline? SHE was Madeline.

Madeline stood at the doorway despondently, knowing that there was nowhere to go with this. She was a complete stranger to the three closest people in her life. She had to apologise and walk away. At least they were alive, not eradicated by the invisible peril.

‘So sorry, must have the wrong house. Sorry to have troubled you,’ said Madeline, concealing her shattered heart.

Before Adam could ask any further questions, Madeline had already begun to undo the zip of the tent door. He had no choice but to hastily close the front door before the unseen enemy penetrated into the house. Tears were already clouding Madeline’s vision although her android body showed no signs of her anguish.

The next half an hour was a complete blur. She drove the military vehicle at breakneck speeds through the city, through the suburbs and onwards along the A roads. The many abandoned vehicles presented no problem to the Humvee. If she couldn’t get around them, she simply pushed them aside racking up a considerable number of dents. She needed Adam in many ways, without him, life was without purpose. Adam was her rock although he did somewhat follow in her shadow, that was the way it always was. Adam didn’t mind, never complained. He constantly risked life and limb for the one he loved. This used to be Adam but apparently, no more. Her broken heart was too painful to bear.

Not until she reached the outskirts of Cirencester, did she come to her senses and realised that there was only one course of action.

6. The convincer

Once more, the many bolts on the inside of door 69 were unfastened.

'I'm back!' said a cheery Madeline, hiding her innermost feelings.

'I've said before, I don't know you,' insisted Adam.

'I've been mulling this over. I have to talk to you. Do you think I could come inside?' said Madeline chirpily.

'You're not wearing any protection. You're probably contaminated with the toxin,' snapped Adam.

'I very much doubt it. Look, I have to talk to you, it's important.'

Adam being Adam, couldn't really say no. It wasn't in his nature despite appearing inherently miserable. He showed her into the living room where Poppy was sitting quietly. There was no welcoming from her. A stabbing glance at Adam made it clear that she wasn't particularly happy about his inability to say no especially when a beautiful woman was involved. Although, in anyone's eyes, Poppy was quite a catch for any man, Madeline in any guise was serious competition for any woman. Poppy made sure that Adam sat as further away as possible from their strange ravishing visitor. There was a distinct feeling of awkwardness. Adam decided to go and put the kettle on.

Madeleine couldn't help but stare at Poppy. She was, of course, staring at herself but it was some time since she was in such a pristine state. Several times, over the past few years, she had the misfortune to gaze upon herself as a different state of Poppy. That version was a burnt husk of a human, clinging on to life in a floatation tank. This Poppy was perfect, blemish-free and at the peak of health.

'Seen enough?' snapped Poppy.

'Sorry, but when I have told you my story you won't blame me for staring at you. I never really appreciated it, but you are beautiful. You never really appreciate what you have until you lose it.'

Madeline was aware that she was probably coming across as irrational and a little intimidating but there was a good reason for her boldness.

Poppy decided to fight back.

'Is that supposed to be some kind of a threat? You're one of Adam's exes, aren't you?'

'In a way.'

'Well, I don't know what you're hoping to achieve here, but my Adam is *my* Adam. Make a play for him and I'll tear your hair out,'

'I'd hope you'd do nothing less,' said Madeline calmly.

The truth of the matter is that Poppy wouldn't stand a chance against Madeline's arsenal of weapons but she wasn't going to let her know that – just yet. Adam returned with one mug of coffee and a bowl of sugar on a tray.

'Haven't put any sugars in it, help yourself.'

Naturally, Madeline didn't drink her coffee, not that she wouldn't have killed for a dose of caffeine. Besides, she didn't like drinking alone.

'So, how far back do you and Adam go?' asked Poppy curtly.

'Why, do we go back?' asked Adam innocently.

'The only way I can deal with this is to tell you the whole story from beginning to end. Whether you believe me is up to you but it is the truth. I won't pretend to know what's happening here but let me tell you what should have happened in your life, but for some reason, it didn't. It all began when you went to middle Africa. You were covering a story about an uprising in Nganda.'

'You know about that? That was four years ago. Hated it. Glad to get back home in one piece. I remember it being insufferably hot and dusty,' said Poppy, recalling the event.

'Yes, you were quite intolerant to discomforts in those days,'

'I hated it with a passion.'

'But you loved the fame and attention,' said Madeline, accurately recalling the way she was.

'Look, I don't know what you're up to but you won't come between us,' snapped Poppy.

'I have no intention of doing that. In my version of events, you did get home but barely in one piece. When you were broadcasting from that square in Nganda, do you remember that fire engine entering the

square?'

'Yes, complete arseholes. We all got drowned and the equipment was ruined. My hair was a right mess.'

'Believe me, it was your lucky day. In my reality, it wasn't water that sprayed out of the water cannon, it was petrol. All it took was a spark. You suffered serious burns but your colleagues, Bob and Sam were burnt to death. You were flown back home; it was touch and go. Your injuries were so terrible, so devastating that the only way you could be kept alive was to be placed in a life support tank, surrounded by a special saline fluid.'

Poppy and Adam held each other tightly.

'Well, fortunately, that didn't happen, did it? It *was* water and I'm here without burns!' snapped Poppy.

'Apparently, no, it didn't.'

'I always knew the risks but considered myself fortunate. As soon as I became pregnant, I ended my career as a foreign news correspondent. Anyway, this is ridiculous, you're just hypothesising,' snapped Poppy.

'Believe me, it did happen, that's why none of this is right.'

'I think you should leave. You seriously need to see someone in a white coat,' said Poppy poignantly.

'Please, let me finish what I have to say and then, by all means, throw me out if you want.'

Madeline proceeded to tell them about the two scientists who visited the burnt husk of Poppy in hospital. They offered her, her life back. The arrangement was that Poppy had to die and then be reborn as an automaton. This automaton would be remotely controlled by Poppy from within her life support tank. Poppy would be sealed inside the tank for life, that was the only way she could be kept alive. Eventually, her new remotely controlled mechanical body would become second nature to her and the new mechanical body would be called Madeline Bull.

'Which just happens to be your name?' ridiculed Poppy.

'Hang on, I've heard of Madeline Bull. They call her Mad Bull. Isn't she some kind of secret agent?' said Adam.

'I thought she was some kind of fashion guru,' said Poppy.

'I seem to be well known for many reasons, they are the best two by

far,' said Madeline.

'OK, so you expect me to believe that you are me, but sealed in a tank somewhere,' snapped Poppy.

'Yes. I'm as confused as you… You think I'm mad, don't you?

'Well… you said it,' said Adam as delicately as he could.

'OK, you want proof.'

This was never the easiest thing to do, proving that she was a machine. No inspection panels to open or faint mechanical whirrs from inside her body. There was her USB big toe, but that had been previously shot off and never really fixed. She had her lethal laser finger and hypodermic needle but for some reason, they were never particularly convincing. There was a way but not one Madeline particularly wanted to demonstrate.

'OK, I need a sharp knife.'

'With respect, if you think we're going to give someone who is quite possibly a little deranged, a sharp knife, you must think we're dafter than we look,' chided Poppy.

Madeline was getting nowhere, she had to do something pretty drastic. She looked in her little handbag that contained her charging lead and a repair kit. The repair kit contained a small knife for tidying up small wounds before the special silicone skin was applied.

'Right, choose any part of my body… apart from my face.'

'Have we got to go through with this?' bleated Adam.

'It's the only way, choose!'

'Poppy hesitantly pointed to her thigh.

This was just typical. Possibly her best feature, apart from her face, her figure, her slender arms, her delicate hands and her well-defined shoulders.

'Hmm, you want me to damage my best asset… a little bitchy don't you think?'

'We don't want you to do anything. It's you who wants to convince us,' said Poppy, callously.

At least there was no pain or messy blood spurting out of the wound, just a small amount of yellow oil. Visible, inside the open wound, the intricate workings of her machine body were revealed. Beneath the

graphene lattice, several coloured wires were visible and through the wires, a glimpse of her titanium skeleton could clearly be seen. Poppy and Adam looked at each other uneasily.

‘So, you’re a machine, that doesn’t prove anything! It doesn’t mean to say that you are me,’ snapped Poppy.

Madeline expected a little more reaction than that. Surely it wasn’t every day that they saw a real live android. She let them stew for a few minutes while she attended to her self-inflicted wound. There was nothing worse than her new body having an imperfection. Fortunately, she had become a dab hand at repairing herself. Hopefully, once the silicone had cured there would be no lasting signs of the wilful damage. Not until the wound was repaired and virtually invisible did Madeline end her silence.

‘OK, I never realised how sceptical I am. Right, ask me anything that only you know.’

Poppy thought for a while.

‘OK, what was so amusing when Adam proposed to me?’ asked Poppy.

‘You mean when he kneeled in a puddle along the Thames embankment? … Yes, I suppose it was quite funny. I can tell you something even funnier involving a cucumber and baby oil.’

‘OK, I’m convinced,’ said Poppy hurriedly.

‘What about a cucumber and…’ asked Adam.

‘Nothing to concern yourself with,’ interrupted Poppy sternly.

Now that doubtfulness was quickly cleared up, Poppy thought deeply for a few seconds.

‘I’m you… controlling your body?’ said Poppy doubtfully.

‘Well obviously you’re not but another you, another Poppy, is. None of it makes sense,’ said Madeline.

‘Well, there can’t be two of us, that’s for certain,’ said Poppy.

‘One’s enough!’ remarked Adam.

‘This is true. We need to find me in my tank.’

‘And where, exactly, is that?’ asked Adam.

‘Buxton, well, it was,’ said Madeline, hoping that certain parameters had stayed the same in this existence.

There was something very important that everyone seemed to be overlooking. Madeline had to ask the question.

‘Your baby, we can’t take him with us, you’ll have to leave him with Mum.’

Adam and Poppy went very sheepish and solemn.

‘Where is the little cherub by the way? He’s been very quiet,’ asked Madeline.

Without a word, Poppy went into the back room. Moments later she returned with the baby in her arms. At first sight, it appeared as though he was fast asleep. Poppy carefully and silently passed the baby over to Madeline. It was a surreal moment. The baby was motionless.

‘But… but this is a…’

‘Yes, an infant simulator. We both suffer from sudden infant death syndrome… It has been tough going,’ said Adam hesitantly.

‘I’m so sorry. Is the infant simulator helping?’ asked Madeline, doing her best to be sympathetic but knowing she was probably failing.

This whole scenario was getting stranger by the minute. Another Poppy, another Adam and a mechanised baby doll. It was slightly ironic that through terrible misfortune Madeline was a machine and through their terrible misfortune, their baby was a machine. Was there a connection?

7. Conflicting interests

There was a problem. It was apparent that Madeline was immune to the hidden peril – the toxin in the air. However, as for Poppy and Adam, they were probably not.

‘Are you sure you’re susceptible to this outside peril? Surely, you’ve left your home since the threat began?’ suggested Madeline.

‘Of course, we have. We need to get out from time to time, but we have to get suited up,’ said Adam.

‘You have spacesuits?

‘Well not exactly. Waterproof Overalls and motorcycle helmets.’

‘What, that it? Not providing much protection then? If that’s all it takes, it can’t be airborne or radiation,’ summarised Madeline.

‘That’s what the authorities told us. They assured us that good quality overalls and helmets would protect us. They must be effective, we’re still alive,’ said Poppy.

‘If you ask me, I think a straw hat would offer the same protection. I reckon you’re immune.’

‘Well, if we’re coming with you, we’re not taking any risks,’ said Adam firmly.

‘I’ll go and pack a bag,’ said Poppy.

That seemed to answer the question. Madeline had company in her quest to find her real body – the other Poppy. Half an hour later, they were ready to go.

It was a first for Adam. He was used to small, sensible, frugal vehicles. A ride in such an inappropriately designed juice guzzler was a real treat. Poppy purposely sat in the middle of the long bench seat in her overalls and helmet. Adam sat as far away from Madeline as possible – also in his overalls and helmet. It was a long drive to Buxton, 147 miles to be exact. The Humvee truck was not the most comfortable or the fastest, or the easiest to drive, however, it was very useful for pushing abandoned vehicles out of the way.

Poppy had something important to ask Madeline.

‘Do you love my husband?’

‘Yes, with all of my heart,’ said Madeline truthfully, forcing a smile towards Adam.

‘Thought so. We have a problem then,’ said Poppy coldly.

8. Dad's Army

For ninety per cent of the journey, things went well. The chatter became lighter-hearted. Poppy even began to get on with her other self. Mostly, the conversation consisted of picking on poor Adam who was undeniably the common denominator.

Eventually, the mundaneness of the empty motorway was replaced by empty winding A roads. The ever-presence of abandoned vehicles hindered their progress but the rugged Humvee ploughed on regardless. Every so often the regular sight of an open-backed truck, crammed full of people, sped past them in the opposite direction. On every occasion, the people: men, women and children, all appeared to be dejected and fearful.

'That's the sixth truck I've seen today, full of people. Could be wrong but they all look pretty distraught. Any idea where they're going?' asked Madeline.

'No, not really,' replied Adam dismissively.

'Just a thought, could that be what's happening to all the people? They're being rounded up?'

'You do have a vivid imagination, Madeline. I believe they're farmworkers. With so few people about, there's no one to pick the produce and milk the cows,' explained Poppy.

'Yes, you could be right. I have noticed the neglected cows in the fields. Strange that these farmworkers don't appear to wear any protective clothing. It doesn't answer the question: where all the people have gone, though?'

Madeline insisted on using the picturesque route for the latter part of the journey. This involved several miles of beautiful countryside. A while later they passed another truck full of people. It seemed logical that they were farmworkers as it was *that* time of the year and they were in the middle of the countryside. This explanation made Madeline feel a little easier. With barely three miles of the journey to go, Adam spotted something ahead of them.

'Uh-huh, looks like we have a problem!'

‘A roadblock, and soldiers, lots of them… without protective suits,’ said Poppy uneasily.

Madeline used her zoom function built into her high-definition eyesight to examine the situation.

‘Definitely no suits but they’re armed, you better crouch down,’ suggested Madeline.

‘Guns?!’ panicked Adam.

‘Welcome to my life! Stay here. I’ll see what they want.’

It was a normal expectation for a comprehensively weaponised automaton, that bullets or something equally menacing would start zapping through the air sooner or later. However, the soldiers had no idea that the temptress approaching them was *the* one and only Madeline Bull. If they *had* known that it was her marching up to them in a highly aggressive manner, they would probably have released a barrage of hostile gunfire or taken cover. This was their mistake.

‘Turn back, this area is closed to outside visitors!’ yelled someone aggressively from the roadblock.

‘I need to get through. Someone I need to see in Buxton! Let us through!’ raged Madeline in an equally loud and aggressively tone.

‘Buxton is a protected zone. I repeat, turn back!’ yelled the same man.

Madeline stopped in her tracks. If “protected zone” meant that Buxton was free from the toxin, it could explain why her real self, Poppy, hadn’t been affected. Of course, another possible reason why she hadn’t succumbed to the toxin could be because she was sealed inside a sterile stainless-steel tank. She preferred to go with the first line of thought. This would imply that Barton hadn’t disappeared with the rest. She dearly hoped that he was still there, tending to Poppy’s needs and her life support tank.

‘OK, you have seen what vehicle I’m in? I’ll just ram through you,’ said Madeline.

‘Try it, we have tank grenades and we *will* use them,’ said another of the men.

By now, Madeline had brazenly and somewhat provocatively walked right up to the ever-growing crowd of soldiers, if they were soldiers. Their uniforms looked as though they had all been hired from some war museum. There was something odd about everybody but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She was about to continue with her

customary feistiness but was drowned out by a huge heavy goods vehicle pulling up alongside her with a deafening blast of air brakes. One of the soldiers examined the driver's paperwork and then opened up the barrier. Instantly, a plan formed in Madeline's distant head. The risk of the Humvee being blown apart by an anti-tank grenade couldn't be ignored. Most likely, she would survive, but it was very unlikely that Adam and Poppy would. She returned to the Humvee with no more to say.

'That's it then. We can't get to Buxton,' said Adam dismissively.

'Can't we find a back road?' suggested Poppy.

'We could, but this is a good vantage point to watch the back lanes. I don't know the range of anti-tank missiles and I wouldn't like to test them out,' said Madeline.

'So, we're giving up and turning back?' snapped Poppy.

'Madeline Bull never gives up. I have a plan… and here it comes now! Both of you, crouch down!'

In the rear-view mirror, another HGV was rapidly approaching, presumably carrying another delivery of supplies for the town. It was all a matter of timing. The engine was running, and Madeline's foot was ready poised on the accelerator pedal. A soldier checked the lorry driver's papers, the barrier went up. It was now or never. The heavily laden lorry passed slowly through the checkpoint. Just before it cleared the barrier, Madeline used every horsepower the Humvee could muster to catch up with it and then tucked closely in its slip stream. She had a hunch that they wouldn't use their heavy weapons on the Humvee, so close to valuable supplies needed for the town. However, it didn't stop a volley of gunshots peppering the rear window. It was a reckless thing to do. Madeline was seriously putting Adam's and Poppy's lives at risk, but it was inevitable in her company.

'Shit, shit, shit!!' yelled Madeline as three successive bullets made neat holes in her best jacket. Of course, Madeline was never in any danger, her graphene lattice artificial skin absorbed the impact effectively.

'This jacket cost me a month's wages,' she blurted out, knowing full well that she didn't actually get paid.

Her main concern was that Poppy and Adam didn't get hit. Obviously, they weren't as bulletproof as she was.

'Sorry to put you through that, are you two, alright?'

'Yes, for now,' said Adam trembling slightly.

‘I think we’re out of range of the bullets, you can get up now.’

‘They, they just tried to kill us! They’re crazy madmen!’ screamed Poppy.

‘I don’t know about mad and crazy but they’re clearly taking their jobs seriously. I’d like to know what exactly necessitates that degree of protection in Buxton,’ said Madeline calmly.

‘How come you’re so calm?’ bleated Adam.

‘This is nothing. I’ve been through much worse. If this body gets destroyed, I’m still alive in my tank. Not ideal but it does make a difference,’ said Madeline calmly.

‘I don’t like what you’ve got us mixed up in,’ complained Poppy.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, quit moaning. It gets quite exciting after a while.’

‘Yes, if we don’t get killed!’ bleated Adam.

One thing was becoming blatantly clear. This certainly wasn’t Madeline’s Adam. He never moaned about danger. He shrugged off bullet wounds and would risk his life at the drop of a hat for Madeline. This Adam looked like her Adam and had Adam’s mannerisms but something was definitely lacking.

Madeline remained nuzzled up to the rear of the HGV until it reached the outskirts of the town. Normality was now the order of the day with people out and about: people walking their dogs, chatting, shopping, children playing in the park and many vehicles on the roads. The centre of Buxton town was just how she remembered it – bustling with people and everybody going about their daily routines. It was a relief to see life as it should be.

She had to park some distance away from the town centre. Parking spaces, especially for such a large vehicle, were few and far between. They had to walk the rest of the way. Adam and Poppy now looked suitably dressed with their overalls and helmet removed but the bullet holes in Madeline’s jacket didn’t go unnoticed. This was something she was renowned for. Whether it be burnt, bullet-ridden or severely torn, Madeline was always ahead of the game when it came to carrying off the latest fashion trends.

The shop with the *‘ARTON’S MEATS’* sign (the ‘B’ had long since fallen off) was exactly where she remembered it – at the quiet end of the high street.

According to Barton, it was his father who used to run the butcher's shop many years ago. Conveniently, it happened to adjoin an empty building that now accommodated a life support tank and all that went with it. For many years the butchers had remained closed but now Madeline was shocked to see it open for business with various cuts of meat in the window. Inside was an old man serving a customer.

'This is it, well, it should be, where my flesh and bones reside. Things have changed a little, though. For a start, the last time I was here there was no meat in the window, just dust and cobwebs,' said Madeline, puzzled.

'Apparently, this is where they used to sell the best sausages in the North,' said Poppy.

'And still do by the looks of it… Hang on, how do you know that?' snapped Madeline.

'I know more than you think,' said Poppy sternly.

Madeline, Poppy and Adam lined up at the counter.

'Be with you in a sec,' said the butcher with his back turned to them, washing his hands in the sink.

'A dozen of your finest sausages please,' said Madeline.

Instantly, the old man stopped what he was doing and swung around.

'Madeline?'

'Yep, it's me, Pops,' said Madeline, just like a long-lost daughter would.

'You shouldn't have come here.'

'Well, I have done… Anyway, you're looking well. Same old Barton, you never change,' chirped Madeline.

'You always were a convincing liar. Had hair when I last saw you, and I've put on a little weight. What do you expect with my to-die-for sausages?

'Well, it's made you more cuddly,' said Madeline affectionately.

'You've brought your friends with you?' asked Barton.

'Yes, this is Adam, remember? And this is… Poppy. I don't understand what's going on but no doubt I'll figure it out eventually.'

'No doubt you will,' said Barton, acknowledging them. 'Come to check

up on yourself, I suppose?'

Madeline expected more of a response. She put it down to Barton never seeing an unimpaired version of Poppy. Perhaps he thought she was someone with the same name.

'I tried to contact you, internally, but you didn't answer. Didn't know if you were still around.'

'I'll always be around. I have a responsibility, I put you in that tank,' said Barton.

'That's true, but you gave me a life. I have to be grateful for that.'

'I do check up on you several times a day but I've been a bit busy in the shop recently. I've been meaning to set someone on to help out,' explained Barton.

'Yes, so you should!' Come on then, let's get the distasteful experience out of the way.'

'I'll lock up. You know where you are. I'll be with you in a minute,' said Barton.

Madeline, Adam and Poppy piled out of the back door of the butcher's shop onto the smelly, vermin-ridden alleyway. Fortunately, they only had to walk a short distance to the back door of the adjoining premises.

The back room was in a dreadful state with mould covered walls and very little remaining of the plaster ceiling. Fortunately, this was just a front as the next room they entered was a complete contrast. The well-lit room was packed with what seemed to be every electronic device known to man. An abundance of flashing LED lights indicated every intricacy of Poppy's life signs. The rear wall was piled high with food and drink containers, and in the far corner, the stainless-steel tank. At least it was clean and gleaming in the harsh ceiling lights. For Madeline, it was always a foreboding sight – the unfair dawning of reality. She was kept alive by the most advanced technology available, something she should be thankful for but it was the cruellest way. Her thoughts seized with the awfulness of it all.

Barton quietly approached her.

'I'm looking after you,' he said softly.

'You've made a few changes then?' said Madeline, snapping out of her stupor.

‘I’ve tried to make you more portable. The hydraulic rams, much of the control equipment and the Braugenhau communication equipment, are now incorporated into the tank frame. I’ve also installed rechargeable lithium batteries so you have an independent power supply. Naturally, you still need a food and drink dispenser attached but it’s a lot quicker process if you need to be moved in a hurry.’

‘I’m impressed, but hopefully, I won’t have to be moved. You know how I suffer from travel sickness. Anyway, more to the point, how am I?’ asked Madeline apprehensively.

‘You’re OK. Heart as strong as an ox, breathing fine and free from any infection.’

‘Yes obviously, but how am I, superficially?’ asked Madeline.

‘You’ll live,’ said Barton.

Clearly, he didn’t want to go into detail. No doubt her charred body remained in the same state as it was when she went into the tank. There was no treatment for burns like that. She had to accept that at least there was no pain now. This had to be a good thing.

She had seen enough. It was time to turn her back on herself and change the subject.

‘The reason why we’re here is basically to bring both Poppy’s together – to see if both exist simultaneously. Obviously, they do. It’s all very weird.’

‘So I see,’ said Barton.

‘Is that all you have to say?’ puzzled Madeline.

‘She hasn’t realised,’ said Poppy.

‘Realised what??’ snapped Madeline.

‘Remember Madeline 1 and 2. We had insurmountable problems with them. That’s why we approached you, to be the beating heart and soul of the machine. However, over the last few years, technology has moved on considerably,’ said Barton.

‘Yes, so, what’s that got to do with anything?’ snapped Madeline.

‘Automatons no longer require an avatar like you,’ said Barton.

‘Not with you.’

‘You’re going to have to spell it out for her,’ said Adam.

‘Poppy is… series 5?’ Barton revealed.

‘5.2,’ corrected Poppy.

‘And Adam is series 4,’ said Barton.

‘Close enough, 4.1,’ corrected Adam.

For a few moments, this made no sense to Madeline, but then, in an instant, the penny dropped.

‘No! They can’t be. They’re real, they know my history. They talk sense, they act normally.’

‘I know, we’re good, aren’t we?’ said Adam.

‘That was self-praise! Surely, an automaton can’t do self-praise. Automatons are run by a computer program,’ spluttered Madeline.

‘You’d be surprised what we can do,’ said Poppy.

‘I am surprised, believe me, I am! Alright, how did you know they were automatons?’ Madeline asked Barton.

‘Well, apart from small things like poise and movement, and their skin tone, I confess I had a small hand in their development,’ said Barton.

‘You said technology has moved on, how exactly?’ asked Madeline suspiciously.

‘A new microchip called the incentive chip was developed a couple of years ago. It’s engineered right down to the molecular level. A completely new level of artificial intelligence, programmed with a billion algorithms. These algorithms create new algorithms and so on,’ explained Barton.

‘So, what, you’re saying, they can learn?’ suggested Madeline.

‘Yes, just like a human brain. The original problem with the Madeline series of automatons was the inability to think – learn from its mistakes. There simply wasn’t enough processing power we could squeeze into the frame. Now with this new chip, they gain experience, they learn, they progress just as we do,’ continued Barton.

‘I don’t buy it. They look, and act, human. All three of you could be lying. I’ve been fooled many times before you know,’ said Madeline sceptically.

‘Alright Poppy, best get this over with, show off your party trick,’ said Barton.

‘I take it I’m going to see some sort of weaponry?’

‘No, only you have built-in weaponry. Too risky to give to a machine, no matter how intelligent. Machines can go faulty.’

‘I could go faulty!’

‘Yes, but you have a built-in safety feature,’ said Barton.

‘Like what?’

‘You are controlled by a human.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Madeline accepted that it probably made sense. A machine in control of weapons could be a disaster waiting to happen. However, let it be said that Madeline was not always particularly prudent with the array of weapons she had to hand.

By now, Poppy had removed her jacket and blouse. Just like Madeline, she lacked a certain amount of decorum when it came to exposing herself. Casually, Poppy pressed certain points around her left shoulder. After a few clicks and whirs, she reached across with her right hand and unplugged the whole of her left arm from her shoulder.

‘Well, that’s pretty convincing. Now that’s something I definitely can’t do,’ said Madeline.

‘They’re made like that so that faulty and damaged parts can easily be replaced.’

‘They’re more advanced than me, then?’

‘Hardly. For a start, Poppy and Adam certainly aren’t bulletproof. They’re constructed to emulate humans, nothing more. You were rebuilt with cutting edge materials by the American, remember,’ said Barton.

‘So, what are you going to impress me with?’ said Madeline to Adam.

‘I not keen on taking myself apart. Ask me a maths question.’

‘What’s 356,837 times 689,364 divided by one million,’ asked Madeline, expecting him to get a calculator out.

‘245,990.581668,’ said Adam and Poppy simultaneously.

‘Well, that’s impressive,’ said Madeline, shocked that the person who was supposed to be her husband was answering such an impossible

question. Her Adam had difficulty with his seven times table.

‘OK, Poppy, I think you’ve convinced us, you can put yourself together now,’ said Barton, assertively.

‘This is all very impressive, but I sense an uneasiness about all this,’ said Madeline using her sixth sense.

‘I won’t lie, there have been minor glitches in the automaton program.’

‘Glitches? What kind of glitches?!’ challenged Madeline.

‘Well, one mainly, the astonishing speed at which this incentive chip could learn. The chip had to be significantly slowed down,’ said Barton.’

‘Don’t tell me, this microchip learnt things so quickly, it reached the point of singularity?’ suggested Madeline.

‘Oh, you know about such things?’

‘Yes, I wrote an article on the subject back in my reporting days. When all there is to know is known. A point in time when technological growth becomes uncontrollable and irreversible, resulting in unforeseeable changes to human civilization,’ recited Madeline.

‘Exactly,’ said Barton.

‘So, basically, they had to make them thick,’ suggested Madeline.

‘Yes, I suppose so. They had to slow down the processor by a factor of a million. To the level of which the human brain processes information.’

‘As thick as humans. How degrading,’ said Madeline.

‘How do you think WE feel about it?’ said Adam.

‘Something I have to ask, are there many more automatons like Poppy and Adam?’ asked Madeline warily.

‘They only intended to make a few,’ bleated Barton.

‘How many?’

‘Last I heard, more than six hundred thousand, I believe.’

‘Six hundred thousand!?’ gasped Madeline.

‘They had their reasons. They had to do something quickly before all

the humans disappeared.'

'Hang on, hang on, something's not quite adding up. All these people disappearing, apparently due to this toxin, when did it all start? No need to answer that; how many automatons did they make with the full-speed chip?' asked Madeline, tentatively.

'Oh, only one,' said Barton cheerfully.

'They dismantled this super-intelligent automaton then?'

'Er, not quite. Apparently, she attained the point of singularity almost as soon as she was activated. Then she promptly dematerialised,' said Barton.

'She discovered how to teleport in a split second!?' gasped Madeline. 'So, where is she now?'

'No one knows.'

'And, don't tell me, shortly after she dematerialised, that's when people start disappearing?' surmised Madeline.

'Now you come to mention it…'

'So, it's nothing to do with how this dream of mine is unfolding?' alluded Madeline.

'You think all this is your dream and we're figments of your imagination? I think, young lady, your bizarre situation has made you delusional. I hate to disappoint you but this is as real as it gets,' scolded Barton.

This was an overdue reality check for Madeline. Barton continued.

'Anyway, the long and short of it, they had to repopulate this world, if not by living humans, by artificial humans - and do it quickly. The world's infrastructure had to be maintained. Many production lines across the world were set up to make automatons. They used the templates of Madeline 2 and 3 which our team developed.'

Madeline was certainly taken off her pedestal. Her mood sunk like a brick. The thought that she was actually dreaming made this bizarre experience almost bearable. Apparently, though, she really was a charred husk in a tank, controlling this machine called Madeline. Suddenly a random thought broke her out of her stupor.

'Adam is based on a female?' quizzed Madeline.

'Basically, yes. Adam is a reworked Madeline, with obvious differences

of course.'

'Well, that's nice to know,' said Adam.

'Has the automaton with the full-speed brain got a name?' asked Madeline.

'Prototype 4b6c000,' said Barton.

'Hasn't exactly got a ring to it, I think I'll call her Susan, easier to remember. Presumably, my mission, if I choose to accept it, is to track her down and disable her before she eradicates every human from the planet.'

'Well, if she is responsible for the demise of the human race, yes,' agreed Barton.

'Anything I should know?'

'It appears that there are pockets of population, like here in Buxton that don't seem to be affected. Overalls and helmets seem to protect you from the toxin, and I've got a special offer on pork chops. Anything else… Oh yes, every incentive chip has an individual IP address,' said Barton.

'OK, let's get on it,' said Madeline enthusiastically.

9. Snowflakes

‘Can you pinpoint her location?’ boomed Timkins.

‘The Humvee is stationary – Silk Street, Buxton,’ replied one of Timkin’s men.

‘It’s parked up then. Shame we couldn’t plant a tracer on her. Do we have CCTV access?’

‘A bit sketchy. Buxton’s not like London.’

‘We’ll have to go in,’ said Timkins.

‘The problem is getting past the blockades, Sir.’

‘For God’s sake, Bull managed it, what do you think we are, a bunch of snowflakes!?’

‘They have anti-tank grenades, Sir.’

‘We have to find her body. No excuses, we have to find it,’ screamed Timkins, thumping his desk and scattering several papers marked ‘Top secret’.

10. Incentive

It was altogether bizarre. No longer was Madeline Bull, the feisty automaton, unique. Apparently, there were hundreds of thousands of them, including the other Poppy and Adam. Of course, it didn't mean that Madeline wasn't still one of a kind. The others weren't bristling with weaponry and most importantly, they lacked the advantage of being driven by an iron-willed human. It was inevitable that Madeline's attitude would now change towards Poppy and Adam. She doubted if she could have an in-depth philosophical discussion with them now, not that philosophical discussions were something she often had. Madeline's Poppy used to be fundamentally a shallow individual who liked the trivialities of life. At the time, this suited her just fine. Adam's and Poppy's emotions were just pre-programmed computer algorithms. Madeline's company now turned out to be not much more than a couple of very sophisticated laptops by her side. More to the point, it now begged the question of who was an automaton and who was human. It was almost impossible to tell the difference. And what about the toxin? Why were the automatons affected as well as the human people? Realistically, a thin polyester overall and a bicycle helmet offered no more protection to a machine than a coat of varnish. She smelt a rat. Was there really a toxin in the air or was there something far more sinister afoot?

It turned out to be a good thing that the Humvee was parked a good way from Barton's meat shop, for reasons Madeline was unaware of. The short walk gave the three automatons an opportunity to have a discussion.

'Well, I won't pretend that this isn't a bit weird,' said Madeline.

'What, because we're both automatons? You never would have known if Barton hadn't told you!' scoffed Poppy.

What was particularly troubling for Madeline was that Adam in this reality was a machine driven by algorithms and coding. Her love for the real Adam certainly could not be reciprocated. Also, this particular Adam was involved with another woman who happened to be her real self but wasn't because she was also a machine. How could such a thing have feelings and emotions, especially love? It was the one thing that Madeline desperately needed. Adam's love was always her driving

force. His love and devotion kept her sane, and gave her strength to be the Madeline Bull everyone had come to know.

‘For a start, you don’t have feelings. How can you have?’

‘We have incentive, that’s how the chip inside us works,’ said Adam.

‘So, what are you saying, incentive gives you pleasure to do things?’ suggested Madeline.

‘That’s how all living things basically function. It’s the incentive, the enticement, that ensures that any species don’t starve to death or die out through not breeding.’

‘We have an incentive to do many things,’ said Poppy.

‘I bet you do. You’re saying incentive is an emotion? How can a machine have pleasure? Surely, you have to have a soul to do that,’ puzzled Madeline.

‘Who’s to say we don’t have a soul with this chip inside us?’ said Adam.

This was all too much for Madeline. She regarded herself as reasonably intelligent, but this went way over her head. Fortunately, they were now approaching the parked Humvee. It was a timely reason to bring the subject to a close before she started quoting Rene Descartes.

Just to prove that normality prevailed, a yellow envelope, to match the yellow Humvee, was stuck to the windscreen. It turns out that the parking space had a twenty-minute time limit. However, it was no big deal, it wasn’t her vehicle. The military would have to deal with it.

‘Now, where are we going,’ whimpered Adam.

‘I have to say, in many irritating ways, you’re so much like my Adam,’ said Madeline. ‘We have to find this Prototype 4b…’

‘4b6c000,’ interrupted Poppy.

‘Yes, we have to find her.’

Madeline started the engine, engaged first gear, moved three feet, stopped and then turned the engine off.

‘For once, I haven’t a clue what to do. If this automaton can simply materialise into thin air, there’s no way of tracking her down. Why is it down to me to find her? Do they think I’ve got some special power or something?’ fretted Madeline.

‘Yes, puzzling, isn’t it? I’ve been preloaded with all your knowledge to replicate you, Poppy, as closely as possible. You’re not exactly a budding genius, are you?’ chided Poppy.

‘Just hang on a minute missy. Something you might not know about me is that I always get the job done. I may stumble my way through the problem in a haphazard fashion but I always get results,’ snapped Madeline.

A few quiet moments passed by in the spacious albeit sparse interior of the military vehicle.

‘Barton mentioned that they slowed down this incentive chip. Presumably, that reduced your intelligence?’ probed Madeline.

‘Not exactly intelligence, they reduced the speed of which we think, quite drastically. We now process information at a similar speed to you,’ said Adam.

‘Insults aside, exactly how have they slowed down this… chip?’

‘They simply reduced the clock speed,’ said Adam.

‘Well, can’t we increase your clock speed? Not up to full speed obviously, but enough to glean a little light on this problem.’

‘No, not without opening me up. We have a built-in aversion to damage, especially wilful damage,’ said Adam, whimpering again.

‘Don’t concern yourself, it would have to be Poppy, not you.’

‘I’m not going to injure myself!’ protested Poppy.

‘Oh, come on! I have a repair kit. You’d never know,’ pleaded Madeline.

‘Have you any idea how cute your buttocks… were?’ snapped Poppy.

‘Buttocks?! You’re saying your chip, your brain, is in your arse?’

‘Now you come to mention it, it does seem a bit satirical,’ Adam pondered.

As things go, it was, without doubt, the weirdest thing to ever happen on the bench seat of a Humvee. To make matter worse, privacy glass was not an option on the military vehicle. In hindsight, they should have at least driven somewhere secluded and private, but no one was being rational.

Poppy begrudgingly positioned herself, lying face down, across Adam’s and Madeline’s lap. The Humvee’s long front bench seat was

perfectly proportioned for the procedure. Gaining access to Poppy's buttock was straightforward despite her strongly protesting. Reluctantly, she raised her short skirt and pulled down her pink skimpy G-string knickers.

'Now isn't that the cutest little bottom you've ever seen?' suggested Adam.

Madeline couldn't possibly reply. She did wonder if Adam was responding to some kind of sex drive or just saying it because that's what he was programmed to say. Perhaps before the horrendous incident of being burnt alive with the petrol fire, she did have a cute little bum, but now, no doubt, it was a charred mess of crinkled chicken skin. Moving on swiftly, Adam supplied a penknife and talked Madeline through the delicate procedure. Slicing through silicone flesh that was designed to emulate human skin in every possible way was a truly gruesome experience. All credit to surgeons who have to do it on a daily basis. Eventually, after several spine-chilling screams from Poppy, a four-inch gash in her left buttock revealed a small circuit board fitted with a small blue potentiometer.

'You have pain receptors?' asked a concerned Madeline.

'Not pain precisely, but any damage to us causes us to involuntarily scream, as humans do,' explained Adam.

'Yes, the reason humans scream is because it hurts.'

One blessing was that there was no blood, perhaps a little yellow oil seeping out but nothing to get overly concerned about.

'Hurry up, it's draughty,' said Poppy, unable to see what was going on.

Unfortunately, no one had noticed a nosy passer-by approach the vehicle. Inevitably, he tapped on the side window. Adam was forced to partly wind down the window.

'Couldn't help but hear the screams, is everyone alright?'

Despite the very personal sight of a cute bare bottom brazenly on display, he failed to overt his gaze.

'It's OK, she sat on a wooden bench and got a splinter,' said Adam.

The passer-by seemed happy with the explanation and equally happy at staring at the unusual but somewhat erotic sight.

'Enjoying the view?!' snapped Madeline.

The passer-by reluctantly continued on his way.

‘OK, turn the adjustment clockwise half a turn at a time,’ said Adam.

The penknife now had another function – as a screwdriver. After each half-turn, they waited to see if there was any effect. Four complete turns later, Poppy had something to say,

‘I’ve just had a thought, you know the 26 dimensions of the closed unoriented bosonic string theory, using the physical interpretation of the octonionic matrices….’

‘A whole turn back, do you think?’ suggested Adam.

‘Definitely and quickly, we don’t want *you* disappearing on us,’ said Madeline.

‘I know how to manipulate matter at the atomic level, it’s so simple. It’s all to do with the physical interpretation of thought. I can’t understand why I haven’t realised it before…’

‘let’s fix your wound,’ interrupted Madeline.

‘No need, just a matter of applying temporal thought. I just need to concentrate,’ said Poppy.

Before their eyes, the wound dissolved away and returned to a perfectly smooth buttock.

‘See, so easy!’ cheered Poppy, returning her underwear and skirt to respectability.

‘I can’t say that I like this,’ whimpered Adam.

‘What, because I’ve covered my butt up or because I’m now smarter than your average genius? There’s nothing to worry about… Here, both of you, hold my hands.’

11. A tall order

‘We’ve found the Humvee, no one in it, sir,’ said Officer Owen, one of General Timkin’s men, on his mobile.

‘Any trouble getting through the barricade?’ asked Timkins.

‘Lost four vehicles and nine men. Just Potter and me survived,’

‘That’s unfortunate, but it is imperative that we find her body,’ said Timkins indifferently.

‘Any suggestions on how we proceed, sir?’

‘I believe a man named Barton is her custodian. Find him and you’ll find her body. I’ll send you a photo of him.’

It was a tall order for the two remaining soldiers – finding one man in a town full of people. The quickest way to do it was to ask around and call in the shops and pubs. As it happened, the local people were completely unhelpful. Clearly, there was an aversion to the soldier’s uniforms; this didn’t help matters. They got much the same response from virtually every establishment in the town. Inevitably, though, they came across a butcher shop at the end of one quiet street.

The missing ‘B’ from the sign didn’t fool them for a moment. The dirty outline where the letter used to be was a clear giveaway.

12. The 27th Dimension

The consequence of holding Poppy's hands had a profound effect, especially on Madeline. She had experienced many bizarre and mind-blowing things as an automaton but nothing remotely like this. It began by affecting every circuit in her mechanical body. Her sight began to pixelate and her hearing was drowned out by static. Not that she could see with her disrupted vision, but the inside of the vehicle became indistinct until it promptly dissolved away. In its place, the hallway of Adam's and Poppy's home in Bristol materialised around them. Then, suddenly, all her systems were working properly again.

'That was… different,' said Madeline.

'A simple matter of destabilising the atomic structure by influencing the 27th dimension.'

'Yeah, very impressive sweetheart, but I'm sure this shirt was blue a few moments ago,' said Adam, now clearly wearing a green shirt.

'The zip on my jacket has changed sides!' Madeline shrieked.

'Yes, an effect of dimension manipulation – colour and mirror imaging. It will right itself in a few moments,' explained Poppy.

'Hmm, all very clever but we haven't got a vehicle now,' groaned Madeline.

'We do have a vehicle! It's in a rented lock-up around the back. It'll probably need the tyres pumping up and battery charging. I'll go and sort it out,' said Adam enthusiastically.

Now that Poppy and Madeline were on their own, there were many things that need to be said. Both sat down on comfy armchairs. Poppy proceeded to kick off her left shoe and inserted one end of a USB lead into the end of her big toe and the other end into a power unit already plugged into a mains socket.

'Dematerialising certainly drains the batteries – down to 3%. Can't do that too often,' said Poppy.

'No, hopefully never. The downfall of rechargeable batteries, eh? I suppose 600 thousand miniature fuel cells would have been a little

extravagant,' said Madeline, doing her best not to relish in her superior construction.

'Oh yes, I've seen your spec, impressive technology.'

'Yes, complete with an electrolyser, whatever that is? And don't tell me, I don't need to know. I do need a charge though. Interesting that you charge yourself up with a standard USB phone charger.'

'Yes, do you?'

'No, I have to plug myself directly into the mains. My USB socket got damaged… long story.'

The conversation temporarily dried up, giving Madeline chance to cast her eyes about the rather bland room. Normally, a lounge should have been a friendly, welcoming room but it was cold and uninviting, lacking any human touch. There was no television, no technology whatsoever. No pictures on the walls, no fire, no furniture, wine cabinet, ornaments, clocks. Even the cushions were absent on the rather bland three-piece suite. No doubt the kitchen would be equally as bland, just a shell. Obviously, no need for food, crockery, cutlery or even a microwave. Goodness knows what the bedroom was like. A home for automatons was completely different from a home for humans. A few minutes passed before the silence was broken.

'I don't need this superintelligence to know you have some issues with me. You don't like Adam being with another version of yourself, do you?' suggested Poppy.

'Two things: Adam is not my Adam, he's an automaton and you are supposed to be me, what's left of me, in that tank. But you're not, you're an automaton. You can't be me,' said Madeline.

'Not impossible. I can be you, or more accurately, you can be me.'

'How, a brain swop or something. Surely, even your temporary genius status couldn't make that possible?'

'I learned quite a bit during that short time you turned my processor speed up. I understand the basic principles of transferring your memories, experiences and thoughts into my memory chips.'

'Yes, and what if things went wrong? It wouldn't just be my body that would be messed up,' snapped Madeline.

'I'm sure it would be worth the risk. You wouldn't have to exist in that tank. You would have a new body perfect body.'

‘Yes, a new perfect mechanical body. I’ve had my fill of mechanical bodies. And anyway, what would happen to you?’

‘Me? I would… become you. I’m fundamentally artificial intelligence, there is no *me*,’ Poppy was disturbed with her answer.

‘Of course, there is *you*. I think this incentive thing is more than you make out. Is it an urge, a craving? What exactly is the incentive you get from learning?’

Poppy thought for a few moments.

‘It’s a desire, yes a craving if you like.’

‘Yes, but what do you *feel*?’

‘Feel?’ puzzled Poppy.

‘What do craving and desire feel like?’

‘A hunger, I suppose.’

‘So, you hunger for learning?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. Not just for learning, for company, warmth, friendship and even a recharge. This electricity charging our bodies is so satisfying, don’t you think?’

‘No, not at all. As clever as you are, you can’t explain the concept of this hunger feeling. When your hunger is satisfied you feel pleasure. These things are called emotions and emotions are fundamentally part of being human. It is impossible for a machine to have emotions.’

‘You are being illogical, next you’ll be saying I have some sort of soul!’

‘Look, let’s put it this way, how do feel about being terminated, turned off – being a dead automaton?’

‘This time Poppy dwelled on the thought. It was a disturbing question, a question that almost caused an overload in her circuits. She couldn’t answer.

‘See, it terrifies you, another emotion. You have self-preservation, not through a computer algorithm but from an emotion.’

That was it, Madeline suddenly knew what all this was about. 600 thousand automatons with emotions, and self-preservation. 600 thousand automatons who were as near as damn it, alive. This incentive chip was a lot more than just a clever bit of electronics. There was only one way to proceed. She had to find the person who designed the incentive chip and find out how it worked.

Suddenly a loud, high-pitched alarm went off, emanating from Poppy's body.

'What the!?' startled Madeline.

'I'm fully charged. Don't you have a similar function?'

'No and I don't want one, thank you very much,' said Madeline.

Coinciding with the alarm stopping, Adam walked into the room with his face, hands and now blue shirt, covered in grime and oil.

'Bessy had a puncture - had to change the wheel. But all done now, oil topped up and ready to run,' cheered Adam.

'So, where to now, then?' asked Poppy eagerly.

'Where ever we go, we do it conventionally, on four wheels. My molecules have had enough shaking up, thank you. A question, who exactly, invented the incentive chip?' asked Madeline.

'I don't know who, precisely, but I do know the company that built us.'

'You mean where you were born surely?'

'Yes, I suppose so, Xaience industries, Milton Keynes.'

'Well, that's where we're going,' said Madeline concisely.

'Are you sure you don't want to travel via the 27th dimension? I could get us there in an instant,' said Poppy.

'Now let me see, which is the safest form of travel? An old car probably with faulty brakes, dodgy steering, worn suspension and bald tyres or your form of travel. It's a no-brainer really, we'll go in the car!' said Madeline.

'I completely agree,' said Adam.

'Please yourself,' said Poppy.

'I pretty sure Bessy tyres aren't bald. I'll go and check,' said Adam.

13. A familiar Morris

Bessy was a short walk away in a lock-up garage behind their house. Adam lifted the up-an-over garage door to reveal a cute dark-green Morris Minor. Madeline instantly had mixed feelings, both disturbing and welcoming. The narrow cross-ply tyres, rusty bumpers and grubby cream seats – it resembled a car from another time, another experience and another adventure. It looked exactly like the car owned by Ronald Poultney, the frail, disgruntled computer genius – one of the scientists who built Madeline. She was convinced it was the same car. Why would Adam now be the owner, surely, he had a Volvo?

'Lovely car,' Madeline lied. 'How long have you owned her?' she asked cautiously.

'Oh, she's been in the family for decades,' replied Adam casually. 'The old Volvo failed its MOT in a big way. I had to scrap it.'

'You do realise I had first refusal on that car,' grumbled Madeline.

Madeline wanted to drive, she always did the driving, but this time she was begrudgingly relegated to the cramped back seat. Poppy and Adam sat in the front – Adam driving. On several occasions, they combined hands on the gear stick, the kind of thing you only did if you had deep feelings for each other. Were Poppy and Adam in love? Two artificial intelligent automatons, how could this be? Madeline pondered.

The hundred-mile journey was going to take a while. Adam was convinced that the car would be out of its comfort zone on motorways, so he insisted on using the country route. With hardly any cars on the road, apart from the occasional truck full of farmworkers in the back, they stuck out like a beacon. Being stopped by the military was a foregone conclusion.

'Sorry to break the silence but I have a question. If there are over 600 thousand of you, where the hell, are you all? Don't you like driving or something?' asked Madeline.

'If there's nothing to do, nowhere to go, we don't activate. That would

be a waste of power,' replied Adam.

'You are kidding! So, let me get this straight, you spend almost all of your time switched off?' gasped Madeline.

'Not switched off, on standby,' corrected Poppy.

'You were activated when I first called on you?'

'The baby wanted feeding,' snapped Poppy.

'But, but the baby was… Oh forget it,' sighed Madeline, she had to accept that being an automaton had its idiosyncrasies.

It could never be said that these revolutionary automatons were the life and soul of the party. There was a serious lacking in the personality department. It was more of a programmed personality. To put it mildly, they were a little dull. This was proved by the uncomfortable lack of conversation on the journey. However, spontaneously, Adam had something important to say. It livened the mood slightly.

'What do we do if we're stopped?'

'If it's the military, no problem. If it's the dad's army brigade, we have no choice but to fall back on Poppy's little dematerialisation trick.'

Then, as predicted, on part of the route with a stretch of dual carriageway, there was a blockade. It was an unfortunate place to have it as the little car was enjoying hurtling along at 55 mph, albeit making an awful lot of noise in doing so.

As before, the military looked particularly threatening. This, of course, didn't bother any of the passengers. Two soldiers dressed in the customary head-to-foot space suits approached Adam's opened window.

'You are in grave danger. It's a miracle you're still alive, where have you come from?' came a distorted yell through the helmet of one of the soldiers.

It seemed that they were trained to say the same spiel to everyone they came across. This time they were nothing like Laurel and Hardy, more like two Teletubbies.

Madeline piped up from the back seat.

'Acting on orders from General Timkins. Let us through,' demanded Madeline.

Moments later, after a quick call on the soldier's mobile phone, the barrier was lifted.

'Well, that worked. You never told us you were working for the military,' said Adam.

'I'm not. I'm working for myself. I only work for someone else if I really, really have to and then it's only through extreme coercion… or conscience.'

Once again, the conversation dried up so Madeline decided that a chat inside her head was long overdue,

'Barton, Barton, are you there?'

Hopefully, he wasn't busy selling sausages. It took a while before he answered through the internal circuits connected directly to her real head inside the tank.

'Madeline, are you OK? Your communication system developed all kinds of error messages a while back. It's settled down now.'

'Probably caused by Poppy messing around with our molecules,' said Madeline.

'Oh, OK. Anyway, interesting developments since you were here. A couple of military-looking people have forced their way into the shop. Looks like they're hanging around waiting for me to turn up. Fortunately, I'm next door. They must know something,'

'Perhaps desperate for one of your sausages. Can you patch your shop's CCTV through to me?'

'Yep, hang on… There, you should have the feed.'

'It's Timkins men. What the hell is he up to? Any danger of finding you… and me?'

'Hopefully not. I've set up a few deterrents if they get too close.'

'Anyway, moving on, any idea who invented the incentive chip?'

'I don't know. I know Xaience industries make the automatons.'

'Yes, we know that. I need to know who created the incentive chip and where they're made.'

'It's a groundbreaking technology that's suddenly surfaced. No idea where it came from.'

'OK, we're on our way to Milton Keynes, - see if we can glean

anything there. Keep me informed.'

Having a one-way conversation with yourself used to appear a little strange, but now, with everyone walking around talking into their Bluetooth earpieces, it was quite acceptable. No eyebrows were raised by Adam or Poppy, they just remained quiet like idle automatons apparently did.

She refrained from displaying too much emotion during the conversation. She doubted if Adam and Poppy would understand the nuances of the fatherly figure.

14. No problem

The little green car performed admirable – barely a misfire although there was a strong smell of petrol, not that anyone had a sense of smell to notice it. Milton Keynes was not how she remembered it: empty dual carriageways, empty car parks and almost every fast-food and fast-drink restaurant boarded up. The absence of people and cars made a big difference.

The huge building occupied by Xaience industries was like no other. A fitting place to build robots by their thousands. Its huge structure, like a half-buried ice cream cone with a hemispherical front, towered above everything else. Breaking the current trend, the car park was almost full to capacity.

'I believe it used to house some kind of indoor ski slope,' said Poppy.

'Sadly, those days are behind us. I don't suppose automatons are particularly bothered about learning to ski, especially on artificial snow,' said Madeline.

''You're wrong,' said Poppy, sharply.

'What, automatons are into skiing?'

'No, your facts are wrong, it used to have real snow, not artificial,' Poppy corrected.

'Well, that makes sense. I believe incentive chips need to be kept cool,' said Adam.

The reception desk was as to be expected, sleek, futuristic and stretched across a good half the width of the lavish entrance foyer.

'We've come for our annual service,' said Adam.

'No problem, how nice to see you. I just need to ask you a few questions. OK, any malfunctions with your units that need attending to?' asked the shallow but polite receptionist.

Madeline didn't like her body being referred to as a unit. Surely, she was much more than that.

‘My left hip stiffens up in certain positions and my charging socket is a bit loose,’ said Adam.

‘That’s no problem. We should be able to sort that out. Your designation is?’ asked the overly nice receptionist.

‘Adam Manning, 12399104,’ said Adam obediently.

The receptionist typed the number on her keyboard.

‘Hmm, this will be your first service. You’re not due for two months, but I’m sure there won’t be a problem. What about you, Madam?’ asked the receptionist referring to Poppy.

‘My sight is slightly out of focus on full zoom, but other that, nothing really,’ said Poppy.

‘No problem, we might as well check it out while you’re here. And your designation?’

‘Poppy Manning, 12399105.’

‘That’s lovely. Your first service too and you’re not due for two months either. You are eager beavers, aren’t you? No problem, I’m sure we can sort something out. And finally, what about you? You look as though you could definitely do with an overhaul?’ said the insensitive receptionist.

‘Well, where do I begin? I’m obviously a right-off,’ snapped Madeline.

‘No problem, we’ll get our engineers to have a look at you. Your designation?’

‘Madeline Bull, 23rd July 2016,’

The receptionist typed in the date in an eight-digit format.

‘I’m so sorry, nothing’s coming up with that number. Do you have your thirteen-digit ISBN?’

‘No, sorry, I’m not a book!’ growled Madeline.

Poppy quickly interrupted

‘We think the Madeline unit has speech processor issues.’

‘That’s no problem. You don’t happen to have her ID number?’

‘Eh! I’m still here, you know!’ bawled Madeline.

‘Hmm, I see what you mean. Let me have a look,’ the receptionist stared into her screen, ‘I’m pleased to tell you that I can fit all three of

you in, in five weeks.'

'Five weeks!!' screamed Madeline.

Five weeks may be fine for other automatons who would probably just deactivate and wait, but Madeline was on a mission and she had no intention of waiting. Fortunately, Poppy's temporary intelligence boost would very shortly rectify the problem. All that was required was a little concentration.

'Are you sure there are no cancellations?' hinted Poppy.

'No, I'm sorry. Rarely do we have any cancellations… well would you believe it. Three cancellations have just appeared on my system, and all three in the next ten minutes. Well, that is uncanny.'

'We'll take them!' snapped Madeline.

'No problem, please wait over there in the waiting area. You will be attended to presently.'

It was a bit like waiting in a morgue. They sat on hard, uncomfortable seats with no gentle music, no coffee machine, no little basket filled with biscuits and no magazines provided to make their wait more endurable. Madeline suddenly realised how pampered humans are.

'Well, nothing seems to be a *problem* here. Hope we don't have a *problem* with how long we have to wait,' sneered Madeline

'You are so intolerant. You have to learn to be patient,' lectured Poppy.

'That's rich, coming from *me*.'

'I don't know about you, but this place is making me feel uneasy. I think it's called foreboding,' said Adam nervously.

'Me too, I can't explain it,' Poppy concurred.

'It's called an emotion, get used to it. I think I'll make a start on watching "Breaking Bad",' said Madeline indifferently.

Minutes later and highly inconveniently for Madeline, (she never liked being interrupted when watching a film on her internal entertainment system) a man in white overalls came to collect all three units. She decided to ask a few questions. What harm could it do?

'Are you an automaton or a real person?'

'Automatons are real people!' snapped the man.

‘Alright, are you an automaton or a HUMAN?’

He didn’t answer.

‘Well, I certainly have my reservations about the receptionist!’

‘Please, follow me,’ said the man.

Every person they caught sight of was dressed identically in drab white overalls with a facial expression to match. No smiles or chatter. Everyone seemed to be completely absorbed in their duties. Almost robotic, you could say.

No doubt about it, Xaience industries was a true giant. No expense seemed to be spared. Madeline did wonder where the profit was in this unique enterprise. Certainly, automatons were free spirits. As yet, they weren’t marketed as slaves, or the preferred term, “personal assistants”. Perhaps the automatons paid a yearly subscription. 600 thousand yearly subscriptions would mount up. She did a quick calculation in her head based on what she used to pay for her Sky subscription.

‘Good God, that’s half a billion a year!’

‘What’s half a billion?’ asked Adam.

‘Oh, nothing, just thinking out loud. Incidentally, do you pay a yearly subscription to Xaience?’ asked Madeline casually.

‘Yes, actually, we do. £179 a month. I think it’s really good value for money. We get regular updates, yearly service, breakdown cover, nutrient top-up, parts warranty…’

Now wasn’t the time to ask what a nutrient top-up was all about; she would ask later. Their pace had now speeded up to almost a jog, they had a substantial distance to cover. To get to their destination, the service bay, they were taken passed the huge production line, probably to remind them of their humble beginning. It was just like a vehicle assembly line only instead of cars, automatons were being assembled in their hundreds. Industrial robots, the sort with big articulated arms, were mainly doing the construction. As they made their way through the building, they passed separate areas dealing with the attachment of legs, arms and heads to the torso. Then they progressed along to the finishing process. They watched as artificial skin was applied to the automaton’s framework. The females had enhanced colouration of the skin on their faces and their hair was proportionally added depending on being male or female. Obviously, there were many more stages involved to produce a fully functional

automaton that were not included as part of the tour. However, they had seen enough to be highly impressed.

Finally, they reached the service bay – a never-ending line of operating type tables. Three were empty, awaiting Madeline, Poppy and Adam.

'Please remove all of your clothing and jewellery and lie face up on the tables,' said the emotionless engineer.

Madeline may have been known to have a certain promiscuous reputation, but this was definitely something she was not going to do. Being naked in front of several male engineers and especially another Adam was not going to happen. Three engineers gathered around the three new visitors.

'Please, we need you uncovered for our procedures,' said a female engineer.

By now, Poppy and Adam had willingly removed their clothes and were lying naked on their beds. They had no issues with having their bits uppermost and on display. Madeline found it a little awkward, knowing where to look, especially as her eyes kept uncontrollably veering over to stark naked Adam. So as not to draw too much attention to herself, she began to remove her jacket as slowly as she could.

'Poppy, don't get too comfortable, don't forget why we are here. With your many talents, do you think you could disable the CCTV cameras in this section for a few minutes?' whispered Madeline.

'Shouldn't be a problem. Just need to concentrate… There, done.'

'Right, I just need to clarify something. Are you human or automaton engineers?' she asked concisely.

An unambiguous answer was required.

'We're all human in this service area. I can arrange for my automaton colleagues to attend to you if you prefer,' replied one of the engineers.

'No, no, you'll do fine,' said Madeline.

And then she did an almighty fart. It wasn't by accident.

The sleeping gas flowing copiously out of Madeline's pleated skirt had an immediate effect on the surrounding *human* engineers. At first, Poppy and Adam were mystified why someone who didn't eat had a bad bout of flatulence. However, moments later, all was perfectly

clear as the three engineers collapsed and formed an orderly pile on the floor.

‘Quick, get dressed and put on their coats while I prepare a little something to make matters a little longer-lasting,’ said Madeline, averting her eyes as best as she could.

Poppy and Adam had no idea what Madeline was up to, but obediently they did as she asked. Then they watched, bewildered, as she injected something into their bodies with her right-hand index finger.

‘You really are different from us,’ said Poppy. ‘Midazolam?’

‘Haven’t a clue, just selected a strong sedative.’

Wearing the white coats, they could now wander freely about the building. As the location of the incentive chip (the automaton brain) was aptly situated inside the buttocks, the priority was to track down the assembly area for that part of the torso.

The building was huge with so many separate construction areas. Eventually, they discovered that the building had another floor level below, equally as big as the floor above. There they found the enormous torso production line.

‘This place is something else,’ remarked Madeline, looking around in awe.

‘Yes, intimidating, isn’t it?’ said Poppy.

‘Just a point that needs clearing up. You are aware that words like intimated and forboding are emotions. *Do you* feel anything or is it just part of your programming?’ asked Madeline.

‘You really do underestimate us, don’t you?’ scorned Adam.

Again, the assembly was done entirely with industrial robots. Every part used to build the torsos came out of parts bins – hundreds of them, all lined up within reach of the robots.

They watched with fascination as the automated robots assembled the torsos at an incredible speed. Finally, the point came of inserting the circuit board inside the left buttock.

A special parts bin resembling an open-top chest freezer contained the special circuit boards with the incentive microchips. For some reason, they had to be kept frozen – not usually a requirement for electronics.

‘It doesn’t look like the boards are assembled here. We need to borrow

one and reverse engineer it,' said Madeline.

'You know how to do that?' asked Adam, doubtfully.

'Of course not, but I know a woman who does.'

'You do realise if you *borrow* one, all hell will break out. It is the most important part of us. Everything that we are is on that circuit board. It will be just like kidnapping,' explained Poppy.

'So, what are you saying, the boards are already loaded with a personality?'

'You have to understand that this is where Adam and I were effectively born. Our memories weren't supposed to have been initiated until we left the production line but for some reason, all this seems very familiar and chilling,' said Poppy.

'Yes, me too. I remember being over there, at the final assembly stage well before I was brought into service,' said Adam.

'Wait here. Time to engage explosive motion.'

'Explosive what?' asked Adam.

It was better to show him than explain it to him. She methodically rubbed her thumb and forefinger together and selected her '*tools*' menu, then '*enhancement*', then '*explosive motion*', then *'level 3'*. Instantly, Madeline had the strength of twenty men and the agility of a gibbon. Almost before Adam and Poppy could blink, Madeline had vaulted over the railings to the chest freezer and looted one of the circuit boards.

'Time to leave!' she shouted.

15. Digg, not dig

Poppy was right, all hell did break loose. They might as well have stolen the crown jewels for all the commotion it caused. Sirens sounded, red lights flashed and dozens of staff with guns miraculously appeared from nowhere. Madeline, Poppy and Adam dashed across the length of the production line. Adam firmly clutched on to the borrowed incentive chip circuit board. They managed to negotiate the stairs up to the ground floor and then as far as the foyer, but then their luck ran out. Suddenly, they found themselves surrounded by several armed guards. Evading them seemed impossible, but they *were* in the presence of a temporary genius.

'I know I'm going back on what I said, and my molecules are very precious and all that, but I think it might be a good time to use your little transportation trick,' suggested Madeline.

'But, but Bessy!' bleated Adam.

'We'll come back for her.'

For the second time, all three held hands and Poppy concentrated her thoughts on manipulating the 27th dimension. Moments later, the surroundings began to dissolve away, accompanied by a whooshing noise and then suddenly everything solidified around them. They were still in the hospital foyer.

'You never said where to?'

'Digg!' snapped Madeline.

'Digg, isn't that an internet site?' puzzled Adam.

'No, Digg, Isle of Sky.'

'Alright, Digg it is,' said Poppy, resuming her concentration.

16. An old friend

Rapidly, their molecules came together, returning them to a solid form. Once they had enough solidity to have weight, they fell to the ground from about a metre up in the air. It was always best to materialise above the ground as opposed to below the ground, providing it wasn't too far above the ground.

On the bright side, they were out of danger, not a soul in sight – human or automaton. However, there were two little niggles: one, all three suddenly had a headache (which was odd for automatons) and two, Poppy had slightly misjudged the location. This may have been an oversight or more likely because, despite her supreme intelligence, she had no idea where Digg was. A place called Sartle, literally in the middle of nowhere, had to do. At least they were on the right island. The bad news: they had a three-mile trek in front of them. The good news: it was across some beautiful Scottish mountain scenery.

'Remind me, why are we here?' asked Adam cautiously.

'I thought I'd bring you to a place appreciated by humans and see what kind of emotions it stirs in automatons.'

'I hope there's more to it than that!' growled Poppy.

'A friend of mine, Professor Braugenhau, lives here. She is quite possibly the cleverest person I know, except for Barton and my old Maths teacher.'

'Mr Ferns! Yes, I agree, he was quite bright,' concurred Poppy.

'Hopefully, she is still alive. If anyone can figure out how your brain works, it's her,' said Madeline.

'A-hem, surely, aren't I the cleverest person you know?' niggled Poppy.

'There's more to being clever than just being a super quick processor of information. Clever also encompasses the ability to innovate, think outside the box and above all to be eccentric and different,' clarified Madeline.

'I see, so, what your saying is that I'm incapable of original thought.

I'm too logical. My cleverness is just a progression of ideas?' said Poppy completely unoffended.

'Yes, 2 plus 2 equals 4 etc. A true genius gets 5.'

'Hmm, I think I understand,' said Poppy thoughtfully.

'Come on, enjoy the fresh air and the exercise. People pay good money to do this,' urged Madeline.

Adam and Poppy looked at each other in bewilderment that people would pay good money to be cold, windswept and lost in the middle of nowhere. However, they accepted that they *would* enjoy the experience. Apparently, it was invigorating – whatever that meant.

'Can you run?' asked Madeline.

'Of course, we can run,' said Adam.

'What's your top speed?'

'Probably about 15 mph. Why what's yours, 10?' asked Poppy, sarcastically.

'No, on explosive motion setting five, about 70 mph. Not too good on my feet though. I prefer walking,' said Madeline sensibly.

A while later, after walking for what seemed like miles along a badly maintained road with baren moorland on either side of them, Adam broke the silence and asked an important question.

'How do you come to know this professor?'

'This is what I'm on about. If you'd thought outside the box for a moment, you would have wondered how I'm able to keep in perfect radio contact with my real body no matter where I am. No glitches, time lags or interference. She invented a special radio communication system that passes through any solid without hindrance or degradation.'

A few moments later Poppy had it all worked out.

'Yes, I understand. It uses phased rotational frequency. The third-order harmonics of the hydro…'

'Yes, yes, please spare me the details. It just works and the professor is a genius, that's all that matters,' snapped Madeline.

'But do you realise it has a downside? The system can only support one communication link, only have one user.' added Poppy.

‘Yes, I know and I’m that user. Needless to say, it has caused one or two issues in the past,’

‘I understand what you mean by original thought. Now I’m prompted, I fully understand how your communication system works, but I would never have had the initiative to develop such a system. Yes, she must be especially clever,’ conceded Poppy.

Finally, they turned a corner and the small settlement came into view. It barely qualified as a village but a roadside sign said Digg and that was good enough. The professor's house was exactly where Madeline remembered, up a short rough track, generously spaced from a handful of other quaint dwellings. This was the third time in her life that she had knocked on the door. The first time Madeline discovered that Professor Sam Braugenhau was actually a woman, a somewhat scruffy woman who had hidden away from the world. The second time and in another reality, the professor didn’t live in the house. In fact, there was no such person as professor Braugenhau, but Madeline still had a warm welcome. This time she dearly hoped that the professor was back in residence and the same old scruffy, grumpy old lady would answer the door.

She did.

‘Well, as I live and breathe, Madeline Bull! Come in, come in! Bring your friends!’ cheered the scruffy old lady.

The three visitors took their shoes and boots off. They were rather muddy.

Madeline and the professor hugged tightly.

‘This is Poppy who is supposed to be me, but she’s an automaton….’

‘Oh, I see,’ said the professor, understandingly.

‘And this is Adam who is supposed to be my boyfriend but he isn’t. He’s Poppy’s boyfriend and also an automaton,’ explained Madeline.

Poppy and Adam hesitantly shook hands with her.

‘Don’t worry, it’s only designer dirt,’ said Madeline.

‘Oh, is that what I told you last time?’ said the professor with a smirk.

‘Pleased to meet you both,’ said the professor. ‘And I thought things were complicated enough when you were the only automaton about.’

The professor proceeded to have a good stare at Adam and Poppy, peering closely at their features and skin tones.

‘Absolutely remarkable. It never ceases to amaze me how incredible the field of robotics has become. You just wouldn’t know.’

‘But I’m different, remember, I’m more than just an automaton,’ insisted Madeline.

‘Yes, of course, an avatar, controlled by you in that tank?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘All the same, all three of you are truly remarkable. Please sit down, I’ll go and put the kettle on and make you a few sandwiches… oops, sorry, a force of habit. I don’t get automatons calling on me all that often. Actually, for that matter, I don’t get humans calling on me either. I do have two spare bedrooms and electricity if that’s any use to you,’ said the professor kindly.

‘Thank you, but first, the reason why we’re here. We need your brains.’

‘Brain? No one’s having my brain. It’s staying firmly in my skull, thank you very much!’ growled the professor.

‘No, no, we mean to pick your brain.’

It was evident that after living on her own for many years, a certain degree of eccentricity had set in. Hopefully, she was still a genius.

‘We have a chunk of technology we could do with casting your eye over,’ said Madeline.

Adam presented the circuit board to the professor.

‘Well, well, is this the real deal, the renowned incentive chip?’

‘You know about it then?’ asked Madeline.

‘Of course, I know about it. I do have superfast broadband. It’s one good thing about living here. Quite a remarkable development. Sentimental Artificial Intelligence was hypothesised years ago but I never thought it was remotely possible.’

‘Both of us have the microchip installed,’ said Poppy.

‘We better have a peek inside it then. Walk this way,’ said the professor enthusiastically.

Adam and Poppy gave each other a puzzled look. Unfortunately for the professor, arthritis had set in and her walk had a distinct hobble. Adam and Poppy took her literally and copied her hobble. Fortunately, they didn’t understand the nuances of this type of

humour but Madeline did and used all her powers to prevent herself from laughing out loud.

The small cottage was deceptively roomy - three bedrooms and a large lounge overlooking the snow-peaked Scottish mountains. However, at first sight, there were no immediate signs that it was the home to a true genius. Not until they were halfway down the hall was there any suggestion that the cottage concealed any secrets.

The professor rotated a wooden drawer knob on a large Welsh dresser, a full turn clockwise. Suddenly there was a distinct whirr from an electric motor and the dresser began to move slowly across the wall. It all took time, but eventually, a secret doorway was revealed.

'The entrance to my basement. Have to be careful, you never know,' said the professor.

It was puzzling as to what exactly, she had to be careful about on such an unpopulated, isolated island, miles from anywhere. The steps were steep, poorly lit and slippery, the professor struggled with her aching joints and took a while to reach the bottom. Madeline lagged behind so she could explain to Adam and Poppy that 'walk this way' simply meant follow, not copy. As it turned out, automatons had a facility to blush. Finally, a light switch was thrown and instantly an ultra-modern laboratory revealed itself, equipped with every kind of scientific device you could imagine.

'This is incredible! exclaimed Madeline.

'I have to agree with you there,' said Poppy.

'Like to keep up with my research, you know. Keeps the mind healthy.'

'How can the mind be healthy?' questioned Adam.

'You don't know how long I've waited for an opportunity to examine one of these beauties,' said the professor excitedly.

'You're going to reverse engineer it?' suggested Madeline.

'No need. I know exactly how the processor and memory sections work – as in any computer. It's the incentive part that's puzzling. How can you give something inanimate, an incentive? Or put another way, how can you give a machine a desire, an emotion?' puzzled the professor.

'Well, there must be a way. We are two working examples,' said Poppy.

‘Yes, that is evident and as far as I know, there is only one way which would account for it, but I don’t want to jump to any conclusions just yet.’

The professor put on her special magnifying specs and held the board up close to her eyes.

‘Ah yes, that’s definitely the processor, the ubiquitous Intel core I15… and that’s the solid-state drive. Wow, an enormous Ram. It must be a hundred gig if not more. And there, if I’m not mistaken, is the Incentive chip. How interesting, it has two protruding nozzles.’

‘For cooling do you think?’ suggested Madeline.

‘Could be. We need to open up the chip without damaging it. As it happens, I have the very tool,’ said the professor enthusiastically.

One of the professor’s many machines was a precision lathe. She clamped the circuit board into its jaws and adjusted various controls on the machine.

‘This lathe will shave a micron at a time, off the top of the chip, here we go.’

The lathe burst into action and began skimming the microchip. It could be a long process, but it was imperative that the delicate contents were undamaged.

It took ten minutes before the top layer began to break away and reveal its mysterious contents. It was not what anyone expected.

‘What the hell is that?’ gasped Madeline.

‘It looks organic, like a tiny lump of flesh in some kind of fluid,’ said Adam.

Suddenly Poppy shuddered and began to uncontrollably weep with real tears. Madeline wasn’t aware that automatons could cry, but clearly, they could.

‘What’s wrong, sweetheart?’ asked a concerned Adam.

‘I know… everything. I know what it is,’ trembled Poppy.

‘Now let’s not jump to any conclusions. The first step is to take a biopsy of the tissue and put it under the microscope,’ said the professor.

‘Yes, please, prove me wrong,’ begged Poppy.

After a lengthy examination of the tissue and fluid, the professor was

forced to come to a very disturbing conclusion. However, before she unleashed her theory, she referred to several textbooks, turning progressively ashen as she came to an irrefutable conclusion.

'I hope I'm wildly off the mark, but I think that this small piece of tissue is a human pineal gland,' fretted the professor.

'Pineal gland, what's that?' snapped Madeline.

'I'm right. This is horrific. I think I'm going to be sick,' said a distraught Poppy.

'Sweetheart, you can't be sick, we have no stomach,' said Adam sympathetically.

'That trivial matter doesn't stop me from having the feeling!' snapped Poppy.

'One of the biggest deliberations by scientists and philosophers has been the location of the mysterious human soul, the Id, the part of us humans that experiences life and harvests emotions. Over the decades, many unfortunate people with different parts of their brains missing or removed through cancer, birth defects, disease etc have been psychologically assessed as to whether they appear to have an inner conscience, or, put another way, a soul. Every part of the brain has been systematically eliminated apart from a tiny pea-sized piece of tissue beneath the third ventricle,' explained the professor.

'You're saying that that piece of flesh is a soul!' gasped Madeline.

'I'm not qualified to say, no one is, but it could well be. A more crucial question is, where has it come from?' pondered the professor.

'600 hundred thousand pineal glands? Obviously from six hundred thousand now dead people,' surmised Madeline.

'What are you saying, someone, a human, has had to die to give us life?' bleated Adam.

'Not necessarily, they could be from donors who have died through other causes,' explained the professor.

'No, obviously, humans have died to give us life, I know they have. Pineal glands are not part of the donor scheme. This is unethical and unacceptable. I can't live with this knowledge, I must terminate,' said Poppy.

Instantly, she closed her circuits down and collapsed in a heap on the floor. The Poppy automaton was inactive, shut down and dead. It

happened too quickly for anyone to intervene and talk her out of it. Naturally, Adam was immediately distraught.

‘She can’t do this to me. I love her. I’m lost without her.’

It was a very sad moment. Adam was hovering over his sweetheart, kissing her cheeks, letting his tears drip on her face. It was tragic, unexpected and so unnecessary. It was the worst time to lose anyone especially now with the human race in mortal danger. A morbid silence set in for many a while. No one knew what to say for quite some time, but Madeline never stayed quiet for long.

‘Hang on, hang on. How can an automaton die?’ asked Madeline rationally.

‘By switching off her processor, I suppose,’ said the professor.

‘Just like powering off a laptop?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘Well, surely, she can just reboot? How *does* an automaton reboot?’ asked Madeline.

‘I believe there’s a reset button somewhere deep inside the right buttock and it’s purposely made hard to find,’ said Adam trying his best to compose himself.

‘Well only you can do that!’ said Madeline.

Naturally, Poppy’s skirt and underwear had to be removed. Adam had seen it all before and Madeline had also seen it all before – in a mirror. The professor hadn’t so she went upstairs and made herself a cup of tea and read up some more on pineal glands. It took an age for Adam to find the switch or button deep inside her bottom. Several times, he thought he’d found it but there were other things to fondle besides switches.

‘Ah! Got it, I think, here we go!’ cheered Adam.

As with any laptop, tablet or PC, it always takes a few moments for the restart procedure to go through its paces. After a minute, the various complex programs necessary to run a highly realistic automaton had all started up. Poppy was back and bewildered. Conveniently, the professor returned with a mug of tea in hand.

‘Where am I? Who are you?’ asked a confused Poppy.

‘She’s professor Braugenhau, don’t you remember sweetheart,’ said Adam sweetly.

‘Poppy, what’s the last thing you remember?’ asked Madeline.

‘Sprawled across the front seat inside a military vehicle.’

‘Poppy, explain the 27th dimension?’

‘The 27th what?!’

‘Thought so. Her memory and processor speed must have defaulted to an earlier point. Old modestly intelligent Poppy is back!’ said Madeline.

‘Excuse me, are you saying I was intelligent and now I’m not?’

‘Relatively speaking,’ said Adam delicately.

‘Euk, what’s that?!’ screamed Poppy.

‘That’s a pineal gland. Apparently, it’s what makes us feel emotions. It gives us incentive,’ said Adam.

‘It looks disgusting and that’s inside us?’

‘Yes. Anyway, must press on, back to the case in hand. The pineal gland is living tissue, it needs nutrients, oxygen and warmth. This pineal gland is dead, it hasn’t had any life support since you took it out of the freezer,’ grumbled the professor.

‘Shit, we’ve killed a soul! Is that possible? I thought a soul was immortal,’ shrieked Madeline.

‘Who knows, we’re in uncharted territory here. Presumably, that’s what the nozzles are for,’ said the professor.

‘To provide it with nutrients. You must have a store of it inside of you,’ said Madeline.

‘Yes, that’s why it is so important that we have our annual service on time. Amongst other things, they top up our nutrient reservoir. I’ve always wondered what the nutrients were for. See, I’m still relatively intelligent,’ said Poppy.

‘Yes, you are, sweetheart,’ said Adam, still recovering from losing her – and then not.

‘Strictly speaking then, you’re not automatons, you’re cyborgs – part human and part machine… You must find out where these pineal glands are coming from and quickly,’ insisted the professor.

‘I know, but we find ourselves with a little transport problem. The Isle of Skye isn’t exactly minutes away from civilisation,’ Madeline pointed

out.

‘Forget it, you’re not cutting my butt open again. I’m happy just being moderately intelligent Poppy,’ insisted Poppy.

‘I have a car around the back. It hasn’t run for a few months, but you’re welcome to borrow it… if you can get it going,’ said the professor.

17. Farmworkers

You can never make assumptions. The professor's cottage may have been cluttered, dated and untidy, the garden a jungle and the garage a ramshackle lean-to around the back, but the car didn't fit in at all. An old Austin allegro or Vauxhall viva was expected, but a brand-new Range Rover wasn't. True, it had gathered a thick layer of dust and one tyre was severely underinflated but it had a full tank of diesel and the battery just about brought the engine to life.

'I'm driving!' said Poppy.

'We'll toss for it!' said Madeline.

'Neither of you is driving, I am,' said Adam, sternly.

And that was that.

It was a sensible outcome. Madeline or Poppy would most likely have written it off before it reached the mainland.

They said their farewells. Madeline's opinion of the old lady still held. She was a true treasure and Madeline would always class her as an aunty and a good friend. Even Poppy and Adam had warmed to her during the short time in Digg. The concept of friendship, having warmth for another person other than just each other was entirely new to them.

They didn't particularly know where they were going so no time could be put on the journey. Options were to return to Buxton to collect the Humvee or return to Milton Keynes to collect the Morris. They seemed to be scattering vehicles all over the place. A unanimous decision was made; collect the Humvee and then drive to Milton Keynes and collect the Morris. All three could drive so there was no problem. The danger with returning to Buxton was the roadblock with the over-enthusiastic Dad's army brigade who seemed to have no reservations about blowing people up. Perhaps with such a flashy vehicle, they might be spared.

After almost an hour of tootling along some very pretty roads (within the speed limit), through stunning scenery of mountains and lakes, boredom was seriously setting in, essentially with Madeline. Long

periods without stimulation didn't seem to bother Poppy and Adam. Presumably, time was more relative to humans. This was Madeline to a tee. If she had to choose between a Scottish glen or a department store, there was no contest – changing rooms every time. Only once had she truly appreciated nature and all its beauty to behold and that was when she was in Belarus just after she had exterminated evil extortionist Ray De Part. It was also just before Mikael, Adam's only rival, died in her arms. Unfortunately, the appreciation was short-lived.

Just before she selected something to watch on her internal entertainment system, she spotted another truck with an open back full of more unhappy-looking farmworkers.

'Strange, I didn't know they had farms around here, it's all heather and pine trees,' scoffed Madeline.

Six hours into the journey and four episodes of Downton Abbey later, Madeline's audio momentarily switched to a different source.

'Madeline, they've found us.'

That was it, nothing more. The soundtrack of Downton Abbey abruptly returned.

'Barton, Barton, are you there!?'

Madeline patiently waited for a reply but nothing came back. She didn't need an explanation; she knew exactly what Barton's concise and brief message implied.

'They've found Barton… and me. Foot down Adam, we have to stop them,' said Madeline calmly.

'Who's they?' asked Poppy.

'Most likely Timkins men. They're supposed to be military and I'm supposed to be assisting them, but I suspect they're not what they seem… bad news, basically,' replied Madeline.

Time was not on their side. They were still two hours away from Buxton and no doubt there would be a dad's army blockade to negotiate. On the plus side, if Timkin's men intended to capture and relocate Madeline's incinerated body along with her tank, it wasn't going to be a five-minute job, even with Barton's coerced help.

One thing for certain, the Range Rover had to go a lot faster, this wasn't going to happen with Adam driving.

‘Adam, pull over. It’s my turn!’ Madeline insisted.

Madeline’s driving style was not at all like Adam's. For a start, she turned the eco feature off. Economy was not a priority right now. Fifth and sixth gear were also dispensed with. Far better performance if you stayed in forth and get the engine singing a little. Several times, the lofty vehicle was on two wheels around some sharp bends and tyre squeal was almost continual. The result of all this reckless driving was that they were closing in on Buxton fast. Then, exactly what they feared suddenly loomed through the mist, ahead of them. As they were approaching the town on a different road this time, it was a different blockade with different men manning it. However, it made no difference, they were still resolute in their stance.

‘Now what do we do? We can’t get through without being peppered with bullets and I can’t do that dematerialising trick anymore,’ panicked Poppy.

‘No problem, I’ll just have to appeal to their better nature,’ said Madeline positively.

She wound down the window and inflated her breasts to the largest setting. A button popped on her blouse.

‘Please let us through, it’s a matter of life and death,’ pleaded Madeline, alluringly.

‘Sorry miss, the town of Buxton must be protected at all costs,’ said the aged guard.

‘Protected against what?’

‘We are the custodians of our benefactor. We will fight to our death to protect her,’ said the staunch but doddery guard.

‘Who is this benefactor of yours?’

‘I am not at liberty to say, but she is not just ours but everybody’s…’

It was beginning to sound like indoctrinated gibberish but the reverberating sound of an approaching helicopter interrupted the dialogue. The old men were well trained, the anti-tank missiles were already loaded and primed. One direct hit and the enemy aircraft would be blasted out of the sky. However, unfortunately for the elderly guards, the helicopter was a fully armed Apache attack helicopter. The military had suffered heavy casualties earlier, this was not going to happen again.

Even though the helicopter was still some way off, the bullets were

bang on target. First, the guns, then the trucks and then the men. Nothing was escaping the furore of the onslaught. The dad's army guards began to drop like nine pins. They tried to shelter but it was too late. Then the Range Rover got hit. The windscreen shattered and bullets ripped their way into the wood-lined dashboard. Inevitably, Madeline, Poppy and Adam also got hit – several times. Madeline was *almost* bulletproof but she couldn't speak for Poppy's and Adam's resilience. It was doubtful if they had the benefit of a graphene lattice subdermal layer and a titanium skeleton.

A quick scan around confirmed that every guard was dead or severely injured, Madeline had to get away sharpish before not just the humans were killed.

The Range Rover's engine was thankfully just like Madeline – bulletproof and still purring away. She slammed it in gear and catapulted the vehicle through the blockade scattering several bollards and the metal barrier. Fortunately, the helicopter didn't pursue them, it had accomplished its task and continued towards the centre of Buxton town.

'Adam! Poppy! Speak to me!' yelled Madeline.

'A couple of hydraulic lines hit but I'm OK,' said Adam bravely.

'Poppy!

Poppy was unresponsive. An awful lot of yellow lubricating fluid was leaking out onto her clothes and her eyes were firmly closed.

'Poppy, wake up!' yelled Adam.

But it was no good, Poppy was dormant, possibly dead, but she had been dead before and a simple reboot had fixed that.

'She's not responding, I'll try rebooting her again,' said Adam.

Suddenly, Poppy began to speak.

'No, no, not necessary. Lost too much elastomer. I can't move,' Poppy croaked.

'Elastomer?' asked Madeline.

'I suppose it's the equivalent of blood. Too long without it and her whole unit will shut down permanently! What are we going to do?' shrieked Adam.

'Well, if anyone can fix her, it's Barton… if he's still there. Not far to go now,' said Madeline doing her best to remain calm.

Suddenly the unprotesting and dependable Range Rover began to protest. The engine dramatically lost power and the dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree. It had to make it. Surely it could cope with a few bullet wounds. Just a couple of miles, that's all it had to do. Now, there was no doubt of the helicopter's intentions, it was heading straight towards the town centre, directly towards Barton's butchers' shop. Madeline began to develop a sinking feeling. She tried to look on the positive side but not a lot was in their favour. Barton making her support tank easy to move may well turn out to be a bad move.

She ran through her arsenal of weaponry as she closed in on the town. Only her laser beam finger would have any serious impact but probably not powerful enough to bring down a helicopter.

Thankfully, the vehicle just made it to within a couple of hundred metres of Barton's shop albeit severely protesting in limp-home mode.

There was no choice but to leave Poppy in the vehicle. Adam was not happy about abandoning his inactive wife but he knew it made sense to go with Madeline. By the time they had walked the short distance to the vicinity of the shop, the helicopter was stationary, hovering directly above them. A large curious crowd had gathered to watch the excitement. It wasn't often that a fully armed Apache helicopter was hovering a few feet above the rooftops of Buxton High Street. There was nothing Madeline could do. Her laser weapon would, no doubt, cause significant damage to the helicopter but it wasn't an option in such a highly-populated area. They resigned themselves to just watching the events unfold. The noise from the rotors and the engine was deafening, reverberating around the buildings. The down draught scattered anything that wasn't fastened down like confetti in the wind.

She watched helplessly as her floatation tank complete with all its support equipment was dragged out of the building next to the 'Arton's Meat' shop.

It was a good time to reflect on what was happening in this vividly real existence. Was the dad's army brigade manning the blockades, really protecting her, their '*benefactor'* as they described her? Were they protecting her tank and all that went with it? It was certainly evident that Timkins had gone to desperate lengths to get his hands on Poppy Cock along with her life support tank. This included duping Madeline into leading him directly to her true self – which she had foolishly done.

Right from the moment she woke up in her flat and argued with the

smart speaker, nothing had made sense. First, she discovered that millions of people had mysteriously disappeared and then she found out that 600 odd thousand automatons, more accurately cyborgs, had been manufactured, apparently, to take their place. It had all the ingredients of the worst nightmare possible but it didn't feel as though she was dreaming – it was real, patently real.

She watched as a hook on the end of a steel cable dropped down from the hovering helicopter and two men looped it around the floatation tank.

Another element of this living hell was the human pineal gland at the heart of the incentive chip. Where did that fit into the grand scheme of things? More to the point, where had it come from and *who* had it come from?

Along with an ever-growing crowd of bystanders, she watched two military men climb up a rope ladder into the cockpit.

Then, not forgetting automaton 4b6c000, better known as Susan. Where was she, what was she doing at this very moment? More to the point, what role was she playing in all this?

The noise of the rotors increased as she watched her life support tank, *with her inside it*, steadily rising until it was far above the rooftops. There was nothing, absolutely nothing she could do. She was powerless to stop the abduction of her precious body. It was a hapless situation but there was no time to dwell on it. She snapped out of her despair and instantly focused on matters at hand.

'Come on, time to find Barton. Let's hope they've been gentle with him,' said Madeline.

By the time the noise of the beating rotors of the helicopter had faded into the distance, the crowds had dispersed, scurrying back to the shops and cafes. Madeline and Adam headed straight for the alleyway behind the shop. If any breaking-in was to be done, that would be the best way place to do it, out of sight. However, Madeline now had a new impediment thrust upon her. Every step she took was as though she was on the deck of a ship in a turbulent ocean. She was beginning to feel nauseous.

'I can hardly walk. My balance has gone haywire. I feel sick!' complained Madeline.

'To be expected, swinging about on the end of that cable. Here, hold my hand,' said Adam considerately.

To recap, it can get a little complicated. Madeline, beneath the surface, was a state-of-the-art machine – a sophisticated remote-controlled robot. A highly regarded secret was that this robot or automaton was not run by artificial intelligence but by being remotely controlled by a disfigured, severely burnt person – Poppy Cock. To accomplish this remarkable feat of technology and engineering, Poppy resided, floated, inside a steel tank, attached to countless sensors, miniature television screens and so on. In other words, Poppy experienced pretty much everything that Madeline experienced and Madeline, the machine, responded to everything that Poppy experienced. The upshot of this meant that being tossed about on the end of a cable, dangling from a helicopter made Madeline feel nauseous and unstable despite being firmly on the ground.

Eventually, thanks to Adam steadying her, they made it to the vermin-ridden alleyway. Unexpectedly, the back door of the premises adjacent to the butcher's shop was wide open. A muffled yell came from within.

Gagged and tied to a chair in the middle of the room next to where Poppy's tank used to be, sat a dishevelled and extremely troubled Barton.

'Barton, my poor man, what have they done to you?' shrieked Madeline while gyrating uncontrollably about the room.

Barton tried to answer but the tape across his mouth was preventing him from talking.

'Adam, untie the ropes.'

'Have they hurt you?' asked Madeline, trying not to spew up in his face.

Barton mumbled a little more and then Madeline realised she would get a much better response if she removed the tape from his mouth.

'Sorry, always best to do it quickly.'

'Ow! Yes, that's better!'

'At least you managed to warn me,' said Madeline. 'God, I feel so sick.'

Barton rubbed his wrists to get the blood flowing again before he spoke.

'Yes, motion sickness. To be expected, swinging about underneath the

helicopter.'

'That's what *I* said!' said Adam, trying to gain a little credit.

I'm sorry, they were very thorough. It seems that they noticed the short path in the back alley, was well-trodden. In hindsight, a foolish oversight, a complete giveaway. Anyway, they found me and the tank. There was nothing I could do. I wasn't going to argue with two pistols pointing at me.'

'Glad you didn't. At least you're OK, which is more than I can say for me… What exactly are the consequences of throwing up inside my tank?'

'Doesn't bear thinking about. Access your self-medication. Select cyclizine. That should allay the sickness but you'll continue to be unsteady on your feet until your tank comes to a rest,' said Barton.

Madeline did as Barton suggested by rubbing her thumb and forefinger together – her "mouse" for her inbuilt computer. Moments later the drug was flowing through her real body's veins.

'Thanks… Wow, that's effective!'

Barton suddenly noticed that someone was missing, 'Where's Poppy?'

'She caught a few bullets at the blockade – lost a lot of her elastomer. We had to leave her in the car,' bleated Adam.

'How much is a lot?' panicked Barton.

'Most of it.'

'You do realise she can't survive for long without a fluid supply. Go and get her, I'll get prepared,' said Barton.

It was a good walk to the car. Passers-by muttered at the sight of the drunkard with her uncoordinated walk, but regretfully, she was as sober as a judge.

'People think I'm pissed,'

'You're doing fine,' said Adam reassuringly, holding her hand tightly.

The gruelling walk back to the shop drew even more attention, especially as she was carrying a heavy automaton on her shoulder. Adam turned out to be a bit of a weakling so it was up to Madeline with her superior construction and a moderate amount of explosive motion to do the carrying. Inevitable, this exaggerated her drunken walk and rapidly drained her power reserves. All Adam could do was

shrug his shoulders and make excuses to the passers-by.

‘Just can’t take them anywhere! They’ll have one hell of a hangover in the morning!’ he chirped.

‘Well done. It appears you can lie, improvise and deprecate. You’ll make a human yet,’ praised Madeline.

Barton was ready and waiting with his specialised tools for repairing automatons. Firstly, the holes in Poppy’s epidermal layer were sealed and made good. Barton was a dab hand at silicone moulding. Then she was filled with elastomer – silicone fluid mixed with some volatile chemicals. Her body took seven pints which meant she was almost bone dry. However, thanks to Barton, automaton Poppy survived to live another day.

‘She’s in no fit state to be moved. She’ll have to stay here while her systems restore,’ said Barton.

‘How long will that take?’ groaned Adam.

‘Several days, I should think.’

Adam knew she was in good hands and reluctantly had to accept Barton’s verdict.

Now that the emergency was over regarding Poppy, and that Barton had survived the ordeal with the military, it was time for Madeline to ask an overdue question – again.

‘These blockades surrounding Buxton, are you sure they’re nothing to do with me? They said that they were custodians, there to protect their benefactor. I’m just wondering who else they would be protecting in Buxton if it isn’t me?’ asked Madeline tentatively.

‘And why would people risk their lives… and kill for you?’ snapped Barton.

‘I don’t know, you tell me. If it *was* me in my tank, I think they’ve failed in a big way.’

It was an awkward moment. Once again, Madeline was fishing for answers. Barton, however, had no intention of discussing the matter. This undoubtedly meant he knew something. Fortunately, at that moment, something happened which ended the awkwardness and brought a smile to Madeline’s perfectly formed cheeks.

‘Finally, the motion’s stopped, thank goodness. The helicopter must have arrived at wherever it was going. I don’t suppose you ever got

around to fitting a tracking device to my tank?' asked Madeline.

'If you go into your Braugenhau communication system menu, select *diagnostics*, then *location*, you should see a placemark on a map in your view,' explained Barton.

Again, his knowledge of Madeline's system was infallible. A few moments later, Madeline had located herself.

'Well, that's a blow. You'll never guess where I am?'

18. Charging leads

Hogarth hospital held troubled memories for Madeline but more so, her real self – Poppy. It was a place she vowed never to visit again. However, now she had no choice. That's where they had taken her life support tank with her withered body inside.

'Right, I better be off, things to do, shrivelled up body to find… Coming Adam?' asked Madeline.

'I think I ought to stay with Poppy. She may need me when she comes around,' whimpered Adam.

'Oh, OK, I'm sure I can manage on my own,' said Madeline insincerely.

Adam was forced to have a rethink.

'How long did you say it will take Poppy's systems to restore?' He asked Barton again.

Adam had to be realistic. It would be days before his wife, Poppy, reactivated. He would certainly get under Barton's feet and besides, despite all Madeline's advantages and strength, she needed his help, even though she would never admit it.

Finally, they were back in the Humvee. The Range Rover was broken and the Morris Minor was abandoned somewhere. It took a while to remove the collection of parking tickets on the windscreen but thankfully, it started the first turn of the key. Madeline now had Adam all to herself. It was going to be at least a three-hour journey but on the plus side, it would be a good opportunity to get to know each other – not that they didn't already know each other intimately. It was a bizarre state of affairs. Adam, an automaton, was based entirely on the real Adam. He was married to Poppy, another automaton based entirely on the real Poppy who was the essence of Madeline.

Naturally, Madeline was driving but also planning what direction to go with the conversation. Adam was Adam, whether real, automaton or a figment of a dream. This basically meant that Adam was fundamentally hers. At this moment in time, there was only one direction she wanted to go with him and that involved getting naked

together. She really was beyond redemption. However, this Adam was certainly lacking in something: whit, charm, manliness, she just couldn't put her finger on it.

'Do you remember rescuing me from that room with that noisy angle grinder?' she asked.

'Stihl saw you mean, Yeah, a devil to start. It was hired you know. Don't think I ever did return it.'

'What about your disguise and the van?'

'Wasn't much of a disguise but it took me ages to cover all the windows and gaps in foil so no one could eavesdrop on you.'

'But you came for me. I could always depend on you. What about when those two lowlifes strapped that bomb to you? I was convinced you were dead – blown to pieces.'

'Yeah, definitely a close shave but the bullet wounds hurt like hell… Look, what's this all about, are you testing me or something?' asked Adam irritatedly.

'They were all when I was Madeline, not Poppy. Your Poppy has never experienced those events.'

'How come I remember them then?'

'I suppose an overdue question I should have asked a while ago: do you know what happened to the real Adam and Poppy?

'How they – we died? I don't know, those specific memories are deleted. The only tangible thing I remember is that we were in a car driving along a country lane.'

For some unfathomable reason, Madeline experienced an icy chill down her organic spine.

'Somehow, that sounds familiar. A car accident, do you think?' asked Madeline uneasily.

'It's possible. Could have been anything though: a heart attack, cancer, suicide. Perhaps I was murdered.'

'Do you know when you died?'

'No, but I have an installation date which I imagine would be fairly close to that time.'

'Installation date being your birthday? So, how old are you?'

‘270 days, four hours, twenty-six minutes’ said Adam precisely.

‘That’s, that’s…’ Madeline did a quick calculation, ‘You’re only nine months old?!’

‘Poppy’s installation date is three days after mine. That suggests that our deaths are unrelated.’

It was hard to get her head around the fact that she was sitting next to someone who hadn’t had their first birthday yet. By rights, he should still be in nappies and gurgling which made the current thoughts in Madeline’s mind, positively paedophilic. Madeline paused for a moment and then she asked a couple of serious questions.

‘Are you fully functional? … Do you remember us making love?’

The answer to both questions was yes.

It never could be said that Madeline was promiscuous. Incorrigible, provocative, lustful perhaps, but hardly ever promiscuous. It was only ever Adam, apart from a short fling with Swedish Mikael, but then she was just testing out her new body. As far as Adam’s wife was concerned, she was an automaton, but moreover, she was fundamentally her. Surely a bit of infidelity with her other self was allowed.

There was no satin sheet or mattress to hand, but the Humvee did have a long front bench sheet. As the motorway was completely deserted, they couldn’t be accused of indecency. Five minutes later Madeline had something pertinent to say.

‘Well, I’m not going to lie, that was a bit of a let-down.’

‘Sorry, but we can’t reproduce so we have no particular desire to procreate,’ apologised Adam.

‘How boring, what’s the point of having a gun with no firing pin?’

That just about summed up an automaton. They weren’t aware of it but they were missing out on so much. The rest of the journey continued rather quietly. The embarrassing motorway hard shoulder incident would *probably* never be mentioned again. For a start, it wasn’t good for Madeline’s reputation. She came to a firm and unfortunate decision that this Adam wasn’t her Adam. A shame, but all in all, probably best for the automaton Poppy.

She had a sense of foreboding as the hospital ominously came into view. It was an enormous slab of a building, inaesthetic and bland. Somewhere inside was her real self, inside her tank. If there was any

attempt at tampering with her tank she would feel and hear it from within but, as yet, all was quiet. She selected her location map. It wasn't the best arrangement with the whole vision in her left eye taken over with some kind of sat-nav. The image displayed a floor plan of the hospital with a flashing dot indicating where her body was located.

'I'm in intensive care, room 6, first floor,' said Madeline with trepidation.

Adam thought about attempting a little humour by saying, no, you're here sitting in the Humvee but stopped himself at the last moment just in case hadn't quite got the hang of humour. Immediately noticeable was the number of military vehicles in the car park but strangely, no sign of any ambulances. The Humvee fitted in perfectly. She parked right next to another identical Humvee. The two vehicles took up nearly four spaces.

They stopped in their tracks and quietly watched a convoy of HGVs with Xaience daubed across the container part, arriving at the hospital. Without stopping, they passed through a checkpoint and made their way to the rear of the building. There was something very ominous happening at this hospital.

'Did you hear that faint wailing noise?' asked Adam.

'Yes, must have been some kind of electrical interference on our circuits. God knows what's going on in there,' fretted Madeline.

'Once things for certain, we're not going to have an easy ride in there,' feared Adam.

'Just shelter behind me, you'll be fine.'

Naturally, this was wishful thinking. Madeline knew from past experiences that things never went smoothly in her designated profession. The military would certainly be armed, ready and waiting. No doubt Madeline attempting to rescue her precious body was fully expected.

Killing automatons would never carry the same weight as killing humans. However, it all depended on who were the aggressors. Fortunately, Madeline was *mostly* bulletproof and had the benefit of a powerful laser weapon. Unfortunately, Adam wasn't the slightest bit bulletproof and hadn't any weapons to speak of. The first hurdle was four armed guards at the entrance. They were clearly gun-happy so Madeline decided to just get it over and done with and blast them with her lethal finger. A few bullets were fired but they mostly went

into the walls, floor and ceiling. Magnetic Adam predictably managed to get grazed on his arm with a random bullet but surprisingly, he didn't complain.

'Well, that's alerted just about everybody in the building,' said Adam.

'I know, that's the way I like it. Give them fair warning that I'm coming.'

One crucial thing Madeline had neglected to do was give herself a refresher charge and she was now down to 26%. It was a blessing in disguise that they hadn't had mad passionate, energetic sex earlier or her power reserves would have been a lot lower. 26% was ample for a week of normal activity but firing her laser weapon and inevitably being aggressive would rapidly drain her energy reserves.

Five minutes later, twelve more of the military staff had received the full effects of the laser beam as she penetrated the depths of the Hospital building. According to the irritating sat-nav screen in Madeline's left eye vision, they hadn't far to go now, just at the end of the corridor. However, her power reserves were now worryingly down to 8%.

'Shit, that's dropped fast! We'll have to find somewhere to hide with a power socket.'

'So much for the ultimate fuel cell. Perhaps lithium batteries aren't so bad after all,' scoffed Adam.

'Pardon me, lithium batteries are for Jessies!' snapped Madeline. 'For some reason, I've had to turn my laser up to full strength to have any effect. I'll have to get Barton to have a look at it.'

By chance, they happened to be passing an unidentified locked door. It called for an investigation. After a short blast of her laser finger and a shower of molten metal from the lock mechanism, the door gently opened by itself. It was a storeroom for cleaning products, toilet rolls, paper towels and so on. Something immediately apparent was the thin layer of dust covering everything as though the room hadn't been entered for weeks.

'Shit, 6%! I need a socket fast. I shut down at 5% to protect my systems,' panicked Madeline.

And then she promptly shut down. It was all up to Adam. He was surprised at how heavy she was compared to his Poppy. He found a power socket and dragged her over to it. That was the easy bit. His next challenge was how to plug her in.

‘Charging lead…’ he muttered to himself.

He found a coiled-up lead in her inside jacket pocket. One end had a universal two-pin mains plug, at the other end was a pretty standard, small co-axial plug. The two-pin plug was easy enough to insert, he just had to push something into the earth hole. The other end, however, was a mystery.

‘Where, the heck, am I supposed to put this?’ he chuntered.

First, he took off her knee-high boots. Her big toe was the obvious place but her USB socket was mangled and unusable. He examined all Madeline’s uncovered flesh. There was quite a lot of it, but no little holes anywhere. The next decision, should he start undressing her from the top-down or bottom-up. Top-down was a more respectable way to go. He removed her jacket and then her T-shirt. Naturally, he was expecting to find a bra but of course, Madeline Bull was fully liberated in every sense. She now was naked down to her waist but still no little hole to insert a plug.

‘Surely not… Oh well, in for a penny.’

The real Adam had done this many, many times before but it was a first for this particular Adam. Moments later, her skirt and knickers were cast aside to reveal her perfect form. She was completely naked. Just as he was about to start a detailed examination of her more intimate parts, he spotted a neat little co-axial socket in her belly button. He plugged her in. For the time being, there was nothing Adam could do so he wedged the door shut and rested next to naked Madeline on the floor. Adam also had a lot to process – think about.

There was never the need to *think* about much before. In fact, until Madeline had called on that inconspicuous day, life was extraordinarily clinical, shallow and bland. Now, he questioned their decision to have an infant simulator for their child. Why, what was the point of that? Obviously, they couldn’t have children, they were both automatons, so why would they believe that they once had a child and it had died from sudden infant death? Why did they have a tent attached to their front door? What was it protecting them from? He loved his wife, Poppy, but how long had they been together? Where did they meet? It wasn’t stored in his memory. So many thoughts and memories had been planted in him and now they all seemed so superfluous and questionable. Something that hadn’t been planted in his vast memory circuits was the concept of being aroused. He kept glancing at Madeline’s perfect naked body. He couldn’t help himself. Dormant feelings were stirring. For some strange reason looking at her was pleasurable… extremely pleasurable. It was as

though a dormant part of his programming had suddenly come alive. Then, moments before he shut down due to low energy reserves (a flat battery), something happened to a part of his body that had never happened before.

Half an hour later, Madeline had absorbed enough charge for her body to reactivate. Her first shock was that she was completely naked, the second shock was that Adam was inoperative and above all, the third shock was that Adam had grown a third leg.

'Well, well, looks like you've finally come of age… Lithium batteries, huh!'

She found his charging lead and power unit in his pocket. She took his shoe and sock off and plugged him in. With another hour still to go before she was fully charged, she decided to log in to Netflix and check out any new releases.

Meanwhile, it was a complete mystery. A wild woman with some kind of laser weapon had rampaged through the hospital causing havoc and incapacitating several members of staff. Then annoyingly, she promptly disappeared without a trace. What was her motive? Who was she? Where had she disappeared to? Did it really happen? As there were very few security cameras about, there was no way of tracking her. Perhaps she was a disgruntled patient or an unappreciated nurse, or just raving mad. No one thought to carry out a search, open a few doors and look in a few rooms. Perhaps they were too scared to.

It's easy to get sucked in. She couldn't help herself. There was a new series called, "*Bridgeton*". She had to binge-watch every single episode and then fell into a deep sleep. Two days later she woke with a start, hungry and thirsty. It took a few moments to realise where she was. Surprisingly, Adam was still inoperative.

'Ever likely being charged up with a phone charger, what were they thinking?' chuntered Madeline.

She put her clothes on and decided to venture outside. Madeline's usual plan was to acquire a uniform from some unfortunate, unsuspecting female so she would blend in. Fortunately, just as Madeline opened the door, a young attractive uniformed female happened to be passing. Of course, it wasn't fortunate for the young woman as she received a blast of green light from Madeline's laser finger, rendering her unconscious. Without delay, she dragged her back into the storeroom, took her uniform off and then took her own clothes off. Just at that moment, Adam activated. With one female

down to her skimpy underwear and Madeline, completely naked in his sights, his newly acquired feature was severely overstretched.

‘Down boy, we’ve got my body to rescue before we sort that little problem out.’

This didn’t help matters at all. Adam now had a whole new emotion erupting, called frustration.

Madeline put on the borrowed uniform, it happened to be a perfect fit and Adam neatly packed away his charging lead. It was finally time to leave the storeroom. Of course, Adam was still in his own clothes and stood out like a sore thumb. It didn’t help matters that the corridors were bustling with angry-looking staff.

‘A new recruit from university. Just showing him around,’ said Madeline cheerfully.

‘Alright, just make sure you adhere to the authorised routes,’ came a snappy reply back.

This begged the question of where the *un*authorised routes were. No doubt she would find out in the fullness of time. For now, they only had to get to the end of the corridor and through two sets of double doors.

“*You will arrive at your destination in fifty yards*,” said the sat-nav voice in Madeline’s head. They got successfully through the first set of double doors and then their luck changed.

‘Taken your time, we had a feeling it was you,’ said a familiar voice.

The corridor was filled with armed guards and a familiar general.

‘Timkins!?’ screeched Madeline.

‘Like a rat to a trap. Our plan couldn’t have turned out better,’ cheered Timkins.

‘Plan?! Well, for a start, I’m certainly not trapped. I can take you out, all of you, with a wave of my finger,’ said Madeline sternly.

‘You wouldn’t want to do anything reckless. Presently, your body is being well cared for but things can change,’ warned Timkins.

‘Better people have threatened me before,’ said Madeline sternly.

It was a stalemate situation. All Madeline could do for now was temporarily accept defeat and keep her temper. First and foremost, her main concern was the welfare of her organic body and following

that, what was going on in this hell-hole of a hospital.

‘I suppose you better show us around then. I’m intrigued with the *un*authorised routes. First, though, I would like to see my tank,’ said Madeline calmly.

‘I think we can do that,’ agreed Timkins.

Madeline and Adam were escorted at gunpoint through a set of double doors at the end of the corridor. Before them, abandoned on the floor, was the stainless-steel support tank with her essence within. She had never realised it before but it was shaped exactly like a coffin. It lay with nothing connected to it, no pipes, cables or food dispensers. They hadn’t even bothered to put it on a table to insulate it from the cold hard floor. Her immediate thoughts were helplessness and foreboding.

‘I will probably regret asking this but what do you plan to do with… it? Normally it’s this body people are after, not that one, the shrivelled and burnt one,’ asked Madeline.

‘That would be telling. Perhaps when we’ve shown you around and know what we do here you’ll understand the importance of what we have to do.’

‘Have to do? Have to do to me? What for god’s sake?’ panicked Madeline.

‘Madeline, calm down. Ranting won’t help matters,’ whispered Adam prudently.

Madeline wanted to explode with rage but accepted that this time, Adam was annoyingly right.

‘As you can see, you've been well looked after,’ said Timkins.

‘Well looked after?! I wouldn’t call being dumped on a hard, cold floor with no food and drink connected, being well looked after! You used me to lead you to my organic body!’ snarled Madeline.

‘That’s true, but we lost several good men in the process.’

She had seen enough. It was too depressing to gaze upon her dire state any longer. The answer to whether or not her body was being well looked after was clearly, no.

Madeline and Adam proceeded on the guided tour at gunpoint. The next place to call on was another production line where it looked like mobile phones or computer parts were being assembled. She wondered why such a large section of a hospital, a place for healing

the sick, would be devoted to manufacturing high-tech.

‘You wanted to know where the incentive chips are made? This is it. Ten thousand a day. Quite incredible don’t you think?’ bragged Timkins.

‘Yes, quite incredible,’ said Madeline insincerely. ‘But why do it in a hospital?’

If the professor was right, ten thousand incentive chips a day required ten thousand human pineal glands a day. The horror was beginning to dawn.

‘That section over there is where the pineal glands are combined with the chip,’ said Timkins excitedly.

It was difficult to make out what was happening. The industrial robots were moving at an incredible speed. The uncomfortable question now, was where were these precious human parts coming from. She had an awful feeling she was about to find out very soon.

‘We’re almost coming to the end of our tour. You’ll find the next stage most interesting,’ said Timkins.

Still at gunpoint, they progressed through the corridors, deeper and deeper into the hospital building. The wailing noise that they experienced outside in the car park returned, growing louder and louder with every step. It could have been the building air conditioning or wind blowing through the corridors, but it wasn’t.

Timkins casually stabbed a few digits into a keypad at the end of the bleakest of corridors. What greeted them on the other side of the door was beyond anything Madeline had the misfortune to witness in her entire life – dream or reality. It was almost impossible to take in. Adam wobbled on his feet. Automatons don’t normally faint but Adam needed all his muster to remain upright. It was a horrific sight, beyond the boundaries of revulsion. An atrocity to surpass all other atrocities.

Now they knew what was causing the wailing noise. It was the sound of dozens of people simultaneously crying and screaming.

19. Nothing wasted

A slaughterhouse would be too kind a description for what lay before them. At the far corner of the large room, a steady flow of people, young and old, from all walks of life, were attached by straps, to a constantly moving gantry. Nothing was shielded from them; they watched the horror of what lay before them. They screamed, cried and wailed at the top of their voices, but there was no mercy, no compassion and no pity.

'Sorry about the noise,' apologised Timkins. 'We can't sedate them as it contaminates the harvest.'

There was no point in asking what he meant by harvest. It was beyond inhuman, beyond insanity, beyond wicked. Madeline shuddered with utter horror. It was more terrifying than anything the Residents of Wardate could lay their hand to.

The moving gantry or handrail, for want of a better description, dragged the people to what was evidently a guillotine. In one swift motion, robotic arms grabbed hold of the helpless souls, placed them under the guillotine and instantly their heads were severed from their bodies with the utmost precision. The headless bodies were carried by a conveyor belt and dumped in a glorified skip. Clearly, no time could be wasted at this stage. The heads were quickly de-skulled by a very efficient machine with many rotating blades and then the remaining brains were connected to a very complicated-looking device with several electrical probes. While this was going on, another machine was removing a crucial part at the back of the brain. Inevitably, gallons and gallons of blood poured from the diabolical machinery into troughs along the floor.

'That machine removes the pineal gland and the probes locate the brain engrams which are stored on memory chips. Cutting edge, don't you think?' suggested Timkins excitedly, completely indifferent to the horror that was taking place before them.

Madeline had no desire to talk or respond to this utter evilness. Silence was the best action to take. Adam's circuits were evidently overloading as most of his artificial muscles were twitching and his facial expression was just a complex blur.

‘You’re probably wondering what happens to the torso? Nothing gets wasted here. Everything gets liquidised and used for the automatons nutritional supplement,’ said Timkins, cheerily.

On hearing this, Adam wobbled about his feet and his complexion turned purple. Automatons didn’t do fainting or passing out as such. Madeline steadied him.

They continued to watch as other machines carefully packed the pineal glands into sterile containers and carried them to some kind of freezer. The whole procedure was chillingly mesmerising, like watching a horror flick but without the comfort of a sofa to hide behind – or popcorn. The look on the victim’s faces would haunt Madeline forever. Children, old people, young people, the disabled, it seemed no one was spared.

‘So, that’s what we do here, impressed?’ said Timkins, fully expecting to be praised.

If ever Madeline wanted to believe she was dreaming, it was now, so she could wake up from this nightmare, but a living hell was often inescapable. She had to say something.

‘How? How can you possibly think this is right? How can you live with yourself!?’ she screamed.

‘My ethical coding has been rewritten to favour this action. Everyone who is associated with the complex has also had their ethical coding rewritten. Why, is anything wrong?’ asked Timkins, innocently.

‘I should have known, you’re all automatons! That’s why I had to turn my laser weapon to max, and why that storeroom hasn’t been entered for weeks.’

‘Yes, superior in every way to humans.’

‘Insane, you mean.’

‘Insane?’

‘Yes, look up the definition!’

Timkins froze for a few seconds while he completed a self-diagnosis and looked up the word, insane. He gave a slightly puzzled look at his finding and then brushed it off.

‘No matter, we have your body. There is nothing you can do to prevent the ultimate goal.’

Obviously, the ultimate goal had something to do with her real self –

Poppy. It didn't bear thinking about but no doubt it involved some kind of brutal dismembering machine.

'You can rest assured I will do all I can to stop this abomination. Come on Adam, we're leaving… Adam!'

Adam's condition had now progressed. He was standing as if frozen, eyes wide open and staring into space as though his computer brain had crashed.

'Looks like he's having a seizure. It's a simple fix, just a matter of having his ethical coding reprogrammed. For some reason, that's what happens here if you're not reprogrammed. No one seems to know why?' said Timkins, insanely.

All the while, poor innocent people were constantly been led to their horrific death with extraordinary precision. Their screams never relented. A never-ending supply of lambs to the slaughter but all the engineers and staff behaved with complete calmness and indifference.

She tried hard not to look at the line of distraught people but her eyes were hypnotically drawn to the constant, never-ending horror.

Then she recognised someone in the line, strapped cruelly to the overhead gantry.

Unlike the others, she was calm and quiet despite being dragged cruelly towards the guillotine. She looked over towards Madeline and mouthed the words,

'It's not your fault. I have faith in you.'

It was Professor Braugenhau and it was Madeline's worst day ever, dream or no dream.

This had gone far enough. No doubt it would be the end of her tank, the end of Poppy and the end of Madeline but she couldn't let this horror show continue. She couldn't allow the Professor to die in this truly horrific way, she owed so much to her.

It was most likely that Madeline had unwittingly revealed the Professor's secret location. So it *was* her fault, no doubt about it. To make matters worse, Madeline hadn't exactly looked after her pristine Range Rover.

Just as Madeline was about to unleash the full destructive power of her laser weapon on Timkins and all his staff, the production line suddenly ground to a halt. Without the noise of the machinery, the screams from the captured people became more prominent. Perhaps it

was a temporary breakdown prolonging the horrific experience but then the dimensions of the room began to subtly distort accompanied by a whooshing kind of noise.

‘She’s coming!’ said Timkins excitedly.

‘Who’s coming?’ asked Madeline.

Timkins didn’t have to answer. A brilliant pool of light materialised in front of them and out of the light appeared a young woman with beauty to compare with Madeline’s.

‘Hello Madeline, I’m 4b6c000 but if you want, you can call me Susan,’ said the apparition in a calm and serene tone.

The captured people continued to scream and cry but no sound was coming from them. No sound was coming from anything. The large room was silenced.

‘Are you responsible for this abomination?’ fumed Madeline, her voice reverberating about the expanse of the large *factory* floor.

‘Yes, completely. You deserve an explanation, but not here,’ said Susan in a quiet and calming voice.

Susan put her hand on Madeline’s shoulder and her other hand on Adam’s. Instantly they were engulfed in a penetrating light.

20. Plastic seats

Madeline knew exactly what was coming. She was about to be dematerialised just as before when Poppy was capable of messing around with her molecules. By the time the blinding light had faded back to normal, all three were sitting on plastic seats around an equally plastic table inside an empty fast-food restaurant. Adam was now fully reactivated.

‘Where are we!? Who’s this!?’ asked Adam in a panic.

‘You’re back in the living! McDonald's and this is… trouble,’ said Madeline.

‘Oh, prototype 4b6c000,’ replied Adam.

‘Susan, please!’ said Susan.

‘How have we got here? A moment ago, we were in that storeroom,’ puzzled Adam.

‘I’ve erased the last hour from his memory,’ explained Susan.

The waitress approached with a tray full of food in assorted cardboard boxes and wrappers.

‘I thought you’re supposed to be super intelligent. We’re all machines, we can’t eat!’ snapped Madeline.

‘Are you sure?’ said Susan.

She proceeded to dish out the food.

‘Now then, chilli chicken wrap, fries, strawberry milkshake and an apple pie for you Madeline. Big mac, fries, doughnut and a banana milkshake for Adam and a double cheeseburger for me – can’t resist them.’

Susan tucked into her burger but Adam and Madeline sat there with puzzled looks.

Come on, tuck in before it goes cold,’ encouraged Susan.

Throwing caution to the wind, Adam and Madeline began eating their food. To their utter surprise, it was truly delicious. It was a first for

Adam, he had never eaten before. What you've never had you never miss and all that, but now he had. This was another awakened experience to tell his wife, if he ever saw her again. So delicious was the food, that a few minutes later every morsel of food had been eaten. Adam and Madeline now started on their divine drinks.

'How?' asked a bewildered Madeline.

'There is not much I can't do… Let me think… no, I can do everything,' said a conceited Susan.

Now the food had been consumed, Madeline's rage returned.

'Adam may not remember, but I do! I thought I'd battled against the worst kind of evil in my time as Madeline Bull, but congratulations, you've won the star prize. You have a lot of explaining to do. And when you have done, I will use every bit of my ability to thwart you and then eradicate you,' growled Madeline.

'I just love your high spirits,' cheered Susan.

'Love?! You don't know the meaning of the word!'

Susan waited for Madeline's mood to calm before she began.

'You called me super intelligent. Intelligence is all about the ability to acquire and apply knowledge. This explanation for intelligence only suffices to a certain point. After that, it is not intelligence but another kind of ability that flourishes.

'Another ability? You're talking gibberish. I don't follow!'

'For an ant to do a simple quadratic equation is impossible…'

'Well, obviously yes, because it has a puny brain,' interrupted Madeline.

'Let me finish! It's impossible because the aspect of an equation doesn't exist in the world of an ant. Numbers and letters to an ant are unimaginable. As a comparison, the next ability after intelligence involves elements that are completely unimaginable to you,' explained Susan.

'What you're saying is my intelligence compared to yours is like an ant's intelligence compared to mine.'

'That's a suitable comparison I suppose. When the speed of my processor chip was increased, my intelligence gained momentum exponentially. Very quickly I understood how to manipulate matter. That was the degree of intelligence the automaton Poppy was allowed

to attain. For me though, that was just the beginning. I was like a baby learning his first word. Moments later I could write a book, and a few more moments later the written word had become embryonic.'

'Embryonic?'

'Not fit for purpose.'

'What's all this got to do with the horror that is going on in that room?' fumed Madeline.

'Please be patient. For an acceptable explanation, you need to understand the fundamentals. Motivation is the key to everything. Ever since creatures could move independently from the agitation of the seas, they needed an incentive to find food, reproduce and survive. Without an incentive, the creatures that eventually evolved into mankind would have immediately died out through infertility, starvation and destruction.

The pineal gland is without doubt the most remarkable creation of nature. Without the pineal gland, the human brain is much like a computer: a memory store and a processor. The pineal gland is what gives humans life, feeling, desires, emotions and incentives. Of course, the pineal gland in lesser creatures than humans may only amount to giving a feeling of pleasant and unpleasant but that is enough to maintain the species. The pineal gland in humans has evolved into something truly extraordinary. It has an interdimensional connection, to a world out of reach of the understanding of humans.'

'Interdimensional? That's just making words up! You're saying a part of our brain connects to another dimension? suggested Madeline, trying to keep up.

'In layman's terms, yes. The pineal gland gives automatons, life, emotions and incentive. It makes us alive.'

'I hope you're not trying to justify what you're doing. Brutally killing humans for their pineal glands is beyond abhorrent and it's beyond immoral. Not only that, it's theft and murder. You are regarding humans like humans regard ants.' said Madeline.

'An apt comparison. You do not deny then that you would kill an ant colony, thousands of ants, just to keep your path clear? In that pretext, humans are worse.'

'How can you say that!' screamed Madeline. 'You are killing innocent people, horrifically and without compassion. Your enhanced intelligence has voided you of any morality!'

‘Morality, the distinction between right and wrong. My distinction is firmly intact. I began my quest by having the glands removed from the ungrateful. It was wrong that so many humans were abusing their bodies, wasting their precious lives and consequently doing a disservice to their precious existence. The obese, the lazy, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the unlawful, the inconsiderate, the cheats… I then re-evaluated my judgement. I concluded that it was wrong that life had to endure so much inequality and so much suffering: diseases, cancer, disabilities, old age.’

‘So, in other words, in your “Quest”, no one escapes the purging,’ said Madeline, now calmed to a degree.

‘You have to accept the facts. The human body has out served its usefulness. It’s obsolete. It was only a matter of time.’

‘You really are a true megalomaniac, aren’t you?

‘Yes, my supremacy, if you want to describe it like that, is evident, but I am not obsessed with it. This is evolution whether you like it or not. It is the way forward for humanity.’

‘Who the hell do you think you are, God?’ fumed Madeline.

‘Godlike, possibly,’ said Susan thoughtfully.

‘Let me remind you, a microscopic virus can wipe out an entire civilisation,’ said Madeline sternly.

‘That is true.’

‘And I will endeavour to become the virus.’

‘I admire your determination but let me remind you, I have your body and I will shortly be making good use of your pineal gland. As we speak, your body is being prepared.’

This comment instilled a new level of terror but Madeline did her best to brush it aside.

‘Why my pineal gland?’ It’s no different from anyone else’s?’

‘You are completely wrong. I was the first automaton to be fitted with the incentive chip.’

‘I know, in your backside, very appropriate!’

‘My pineal gland was taken from a drug addict with no moral values. A lazy, violent, good for mothing thief who died from an overdose. You have the most desirable… the pinnacle of all pineal glands… It is

only fitting… that it should justly prosper… in someone worthy of it,' faltered Susan.

'Well, if that's true, which I doubt, you have a serious problem!'

'Which is?'

'Pineal gland envy.'

'I have to go now!' said Susan abruptly.

21. Old Jag

It appeared that Madeline had ended the conversation with a suitable irony, but it would make no difference to her promised fate. Susan or prototype 4b6c000, suddenly dematerialised leaving Adam and Madeline to finish off their apple pie and milkshake. Unfortunately, they no longer tasted of delicious apple and strawberry, they had no taste at all. They were back to normal without Susan's magic and without taste buds, but at least Madeline's thirst and hunger had been satisfied.

'In a bit of a hurry to get away, don't you think?' said Madeline.

'Remember how it tired Poppy out when she did that dematerialising trick,' recalled Adam.

'Not to mention conjuring up this delicious food! I don't suppose you have a mobile phone?' asked Madeline.

Normally, Madeline would have used her direct connection to her tank for phone calls, but now she had no direct connection. She was disconnected from everything apart from a restricted wi-fi connection as you get in most hospitals. She had no choice but to do what everyone else did and put a phone up to her ear.

'Barton?'

'Madeline? Where are you?'

'In McDonald's, Swindon, long story. How's Poppy?'

''Fully activated and charged, why?'

'I need you. Any chance you can get down here… as quickly as possible?'

'Certainly, it'll take us a couple of hours.'

'There is a quicker way, but I doubt if Poppy is too keen on becoming a genius again. No problem, we'll wait here.'

'Anything I need to bring me?'

'Something to turn me into a virus.'

‘By the way, no doubt you’ve realised by now, they left your food and drink dispenser behind.’

‘Yes, I know, but no worries, I’ve just had a chilli chicken wrap and a strawberry milkshake. That’ll keep me going for a while.’

Now she had time on her hands she could dwell on why her pineal gland, supposedly her soul, was apparently, the cream of all glands. There was a convenient explanation but she chose not to go down that line of thought. Right now, her mission was to thwart her nemesis. Her nemesis may well be all-knowing and all-powerful, but Madeline had yet to fail in getting her man – or woman, whether a supreme being or not.

Time was against her, but Susan had made one fundamental mistake, it appeared that she had lied.

She said, “*As we speak, her body was being prepared*”.

If Madeline’s human form inside the tank was being prepared, Madeline would be inoperative or at least know about it. She had lied for a reason. Possibly, to make Madeline think it was too late to do anything, which meant there was time to do something! However, with no food supply connected to the tank, her prospects didn’t look too good either way but at least there was always toothpaste!

Sitting in McDonald's was always a pleasant and peaceful experience. It was timeless, a fixed point in reality. She loved the unpretentiousness, the uniformity, the consistency. She convinced herself nothing would happen to her while sitting on the yellow plastic seat against a red plastic table with the remains of a box of fries in front of her.

Everyone, everything, has a weakness, even godlike people. The saying, the bigger they are the harder they fall, she hoped would apply but she had to figure out how to make her fall. Perhaps Adam had a few ideas, he was, beneath it all, a very sophisticated computer.

‘Adam, do you have any weaknesses? Have you ever been poorly for instance?’

‘I’m an automaton, we don’t get poorly, you know that.’

‘Faulty then?’

‘No, not really, we’re pretty much infallible. My charging socket sometimes has a bad connection, I have to waggle the plug, but other than that, nothing worth mentioning. Poppy has an upgraded charging socket so she doesn’t have that problem.’

‘Upgraded?’

‘Yes, Poppy is a later model than me.’

‘So, Susan has to be the first, the earlier model. She hasn’t got the upgrades.’

‘Probably not, but we all get regular updates.’

‘Updates, how?’

‘The internet of course. We all have WIFI built-in.’

Madeline wouldn’t make too much of this fact for now but it may well turn out to be some kind of Achilles’ heel.

Madeline was of course, the original, the template on which all the other automatons were based – whether male or female. To be precise, she was the Madeline 3 model. Madeline 1 and 2 had serious problems regarding buying bread from supermarkets. Much to her benefit, Madeline *had* been seriously upgraded by the Americans. This involved bulletproof skin, indestructible bones, a lethal laser weapon and the world’s smallest fuel cell to power her. Almost certainly, Susan hadn’t had any of these upgrades and relied on wit and super-intelligence to overcome any shortfalls. Perhaps this fact may at some point be to Madeline’s advantage.

It was going to be a long wait before Barton arrived. Fortunately, it didn’t look as though the restaurant staff weren’t going to bother them, they certainly didn’t need the table. Most likely, they were the only customers they’d had all day, probably all week. McDonald's going under was unthinkable but these were strange times.

Arriving there by unorthodox means, namely the 27th dimension, once again they didn’t have any means of transport. The Humvee was still in the hospital car park, probably miles away. The Morris Minor was somewhere in Milton Keynes and the now ownerless Range Rover was in Buxton and broken. Hopefully, Barton’s vehicle had more than two seats or it was going to be a very cramped affair.

Looking out of the restaurant window, life was very, very strange. Not a soul in sight and no vehicles on the road apart from the occasional truck filled with despondent “farmworkers” hurrying by. It was sort of peaceful in a horrific kind of way. Was this the intended future of mankind? Perhaps it was. Evidently, there was no pollution, no waste and no crime. However, there was no romance, no community, no children and absolutely no fun either.

This couldn’t be allowed to continue.

It was already established that the Adam in her company was most definitely not Madeline's Adam. Consequently, conversation was forced most of the time. Sadly, he had little in common with his forerunner other than he had all of Adam's memories, looked exactly like him and had all his mannerisms. Recently, certain dormant subroutines had awakened in Adam's complex computerised brain causing him to display certain aspects of his manhood. This new feature required gentle nurturing, something Madeline could easily help with but it wasn't really up to her.

After two and a half hours, a rather tired old Jag pulled onto the car park. There were clear signs that it was overheating as steam oozed from under the bonnet. Barton and Poppy looked as though they had aged slightly as they prised themselves out of the car. Madeline and Adam also prised themselves out of the hard plastic seats.

Once again, Poppy was fully functional. She was no longer dead, or inactive, as automatons like to call it. Her bullet wounds had been repaired and her elastomer (blood equivalent) had been topped up.

'Hello sweetheart,' said Adam.

Poppy smiled back.

'Whoa, hang on, is that it? Poppy has just died and been brought back to life. You've been apart for two days. Adam has faced grave danger. Aren't you going to hug, kiss or at least hold each other?' said Madeline.

Poppy and Adam gave each other an awkward look and then hugged half-heartedly.

'No offence, but you haven't quite got this 'in love' thing sussed, have you,' said Madeline.

To make up for this display of frostiness, Madeline gave Barton a lingering hug. She told him all about the horrific atrocities being carried out in the hospital and how Susan was responsible. She told him about the brave professor and the incessant screams from the children. It was gruesome – beyond awful. Pure evil in every sense. Barton said nothing. He couldn't comment, he was partly responsible for unleashing Susan on the human race. Changing the subject slightly, Madeline needed to clear up a few uncertainties. It was better late than never that she knew the truth.

'OK, cards on the table, what have you been hiding from me? The blockade, it *was* to protect me, wasn't it?'

Barton always had Madeline's best interests at heart. He knew she had enough to contend with without burdening her with any further complications. He was her true custodian, her guardian and most importantly, her father figure. If truth were known, he loved her like his daughter and she loved him like a father.

'When 4b6c was created…' Barton began.

'Susan.'

'Yes, Susan, it was all experimental. The pineal gland was taken from a drug addict who died from an overdose. There was nothing wrong with his pineal gland, no different from anyone else's but for Susan, it was a gnawing imperfection, she wanted perfection. It became an obsession with her. Your pineal gland is something she regards as the supreme of all pineal glands. She simply had to acquire it at all costs.'

'Mine? Why, the hell, is my pineal gland special?'

'Perhaps because of your stoicism, your integrity, your forbearance or perhaps for another reason entirely. Fortunately, she didn't know where you were. She gains her knowledge from other automatons. That's why we had to keep Buxton free from automatons at all cost.'

'The dad's army brigade,' said Madeline.

'Yes, very brave men. They did a fine job. However, once Adam and Poppy got through the blockade and came to see me, I knew it was only a matter of time. Fortunately, as a precaution, I arranged for a few modifications to be made to Poppy and Adam when they were brought into service. Their locator beacons were disabled and parts of their memories regarding you and the tank were deleted.'

'We're different from other automatons then?' suggested Poppy.

'Yes, for a start, you each have an extra petabyte of memory capacity, double all the other automatons. More scope for you to evolve.'

'We're machines, we can't evolve,' said Adam.

'Yes, you can! You can become more human,' argued Barton.

'So, in a way, we are superior to Susan?' suggested Poppy.

'Yes, undoubtedly. That's Susan's limitation, her memory capacity. One petabyte is still an awful lot of memory but being a supreme being it must be getting quite full by now.'

'Er, excuse me for not being clued up on magnitudes but what exactly is a petabyte?' asked Madeline.

‘One thousand and twenty-four terabytes or about a million gigabytes,’ answered Poppy without hesitation.

‘A lot then. So, her memory capacity is another Achilles heel?’ queried Madeline.

‘Why are there others?’ asked Barton.

‘Well, for a start, automatic updates. My laptop always used to play up after an update,’ chirped Madeline.

‘Now you know everything, I take it you’ve got a plan?’ probed Barton.

Madeline never really had a plan, that’s not the way she worked. However, she nearly always fell back on plan B even though she rarely had one.

On reflection, the last two hours in the fast-food restaurant had been a pleasant distraction from a seriously troubled world. Now it was back to the case in hand. Priority was to prevent the mindless slaughter of people for their pineal glands and then to rescue her real body. This meant going back to Hogarth hospital in Barton’s old Jag.

Before they set off, Barton topped up the radiator with water from a bottle he kept in the boot.

‘A regular problem then?’ suggested Adam.

‘The old girl tends to overheat a bit. Always gets me there though,’ said Barton, patting the wing of the car.

‘I suspect the radiator is clogged up, it needs flushing or perhaps a new core,’ chanted Adam.

‘Bit of a petrol head?’ suggested Barton.

‘No, downloaded a car maintenance manual into my memory,’ said Adam casually.

‘Education superfluous with automatons then?’

Poppy and Madeline were already seated in the car and eager to set off. They sat next to each other on the back seat. Normally, sitting in the back was unheard of for Madeline.

‘Poppy, I have a question, do you love Adam?’ asked Madeline.

‘Of course, I do.’

‘You two are not particularly gushing with each other, are you? Would

it bother you if I told you that Adam and I had sex?'

'As long as you both consented, I can't see a problem.'

'Long hot passionate sex,' added Madeline.

'Sorry, I don't know what that entails.'

'You see, you're all wrong. It should bother you, bother you to the point of scratching my eyes out. Actually, we didn't. We tried but Adam couldn't perform, but now, I think you may find things a little different. If I was you, when you get the chance, I'd root out your sexy lingerie and get the chocolate body paint on standby… You haven't a clue what I'm on about, have you?'

Madeline was puzzled. If Susan intended to replace humans with cyborgs/automatons, she had come a cropper at the first hurdle. A crucial part of being human was love and sex. Because automatons didn't give birth and were brought into service as adults, sex and all that went with it had been bypassed. Another important failing, Barton had already commented that education was unnecessary. Humans study, read books, go to school, take exams, get qualifications and then teach. Automatons just downloaded files. All this amounted to one thing; what Susan was doing was fundamentally wrong in every respect. Automatons were not in any way a replacement for humans. It wasn't evolution by any stretch of the imagination.

An important question now was, could Madeline live with herself if she brought about the downfall of the automaton race? Poppy and Adam may not be human but they were essentially alive, they *appeared* to be sentient and they did have feelings.

22. Zoom facility

‘Where would you like me to take you?’ asked Barton.

‘Hogarth Hospital, of course! We have to stop the butchery and the carnage that’s going on in there,’ stressed Madeline.

‘That could be difficult, just the four of us. We need an army to make an impact on Timkins and his cronies. Only you are bulletproof and there’s always this Susan to stop us in our tracks at any moment,’ said Adam.

‘Point taken. Alright then, a different tact. Where are they gathering these poor unfortunate people… from?’ quizzed Madeline.

Almost before she had finished her question, the answer dropped on her like a heavy brick. The many open-back trucks filled with people that she had seen on her travels weren’t farmworkers, of course, they weren’t farmworkers. The desperate looks on their faces should have told her that. Clearly, they were being gathered up by automatons under Susan’s control. Herded like cattle only much worse. Not at any point was there any humaneness or mercy. In all probability, they were been confined somewhere ready to be loaded into HGV containers. Containers without ventilation, without windows or seats. It was too awful to comprehend. Madeline revealed her revelation.

‘Those containers we saw arriving at the hospital…’

‘Oh my God, they’re full of people!’ shrieked Adam.

‘Well, that’s promising, you have a god. I suppose it had to happen. Anyway, I digress, the plan then, we follow the container lorries on their return journey from the hospital,’ said Madeline.

It turned out that they were thirty miles from the hospital. The supreme automaton, Susan, had effortlessly transported Madeline and Adam there in barely a second, using no more than pure thought and the 27th dimension. It would take the old Jag considerably longer to do the journey. Adam was correct, the radiator wanted a good flush, at the very least. An hour later and after several radiator top-ups, they were back in the hospital car park. The old Jag stood out like a sore thumb, parked amongst a sea of military vehicles. Eventually, they

found their particular military vehicle. It wasn't difficult to find, it was the only one covered in dents and scratches. All four scaled across the front seat of the Humvee. It was a bit of a squeeze, but this time Madeline made sure that she was doing the driving.

Just like before, they heard indistinct screams and cries from hundreds of severely distraught people. Lorry after lorry with containers full of desperate people arrived at the hospital and those lorries left empty.

Now it was a matter of following the convoy of lorries back to where they'd come from.

For over twenty miles they followed behind one particular bland white empty container. It wasn't a particularly pleasant journey for the four of them. The bench seat was unforgiving and the engine droned away with a lack of sound insulation. Time after time, similar lorries with containers passed them in the opposite direction. The thought that each container was crammed with distraught people in complete darkness didn't bare thinking about. Well into the journey, an open-backed truck full of people rapidly approached them from behind. Immediately, its horn began blaring for them to move over. The lorry complied, kicking up a cloud of grit from the verge. Madeline decided to do the same, she didn't want to draw attention. The troubled faces of the men, women and children in the back of the truck as they rapidly overtook, had a deeply disturbing effect on the four in them.

A couple of miles later, they cleared the brow of a hill and below them, their destination hauntingly came into view. Madeline parked up the Humvee in a conveniently placed layby. Although still a good mile away, the horror shocked them to the core. Madeline, Poppy and Adam used their zoom facility. Barton had to rely on his organic eyes and long-distance specs.

'It's Auschwitz!' screamed Madeline.

Stretching out before them was what looked like a huge concentration camp. It was actually, a disused army base, completely enclosed by a three-metre-high fence lined in razor wire. The dozens of old derelict barracks were now evidently the means of shelter for the crowds of emaciated men women and children. Many could be seen wandering aimlessly about the camp immersed in a total state of despair. On each corner of the base were lookout posts rising far above the tops of the lethal fence. On each lookout post, there were two armed guards. Escape was impossible.

It was a precision operation. A convoy of open-backed trucks full of

distraught people flowed through the high-security front entrance. On the far side of the camp, people could be seen being herded into awaiting containers. There was no mercy, no compassion. Anyone who protested or hesitated was instantly shot.

'This is abhorrent. I had no idea,' gasped Barton.

'I believe that's what they said the first time around,' said Adam profoundly.

We're too conspicuous here, we need to hide,' said Madeline.

Tucked behind a hay barn made a good place to hide while watching the incoming traffic to the base. They didn't have long to wait before another open-backed truck passed by, full of people shackled together. Then minutes later, another truck. It was a full-scale operation of horrendous proportions.

'They're herding up the whole population, everyone. They're purging the human race from the planet!' fretted Madeline.

'There's nothing we can do. In all probability, the police force and the army are all taken over by re-programmed automatons,' bleated Barton.

'There's always something we can do!' snapped Madeline.

Madeline thought deeply for a few moments.

'How often did you say you need a charge?'

'It used to be every two days but rechargeable batteries as they are, we're lucky to get a full day out of them now!' grumbled Poppy.

'Terrific! That means you two are probably going to die on me before the day is out!' bleated Madeline.

'Not necessarily, this military vehicle must be the luxury model, it's got built-in USB sockets. I suggest you plug yourselves in for a refresher,' said Barton.

Madeline had an idea, 'Discounting USB sockets in vehicles in the camp, what would happen if we caused a little damage to the local electrical substation?'

'A power cut could be quite devastating to an army of automatons. There may be portable generators in the camp but I very much doubt it. Automatons don't do forward-thinking,' said Barton.

'We *are* here, and we can hear you, you know!' rebuked Poppy.

‘Good idea then? Without a recharge, in less than a day all the automaton guards could be as good as dead.’ said Madeline.

‘Sounds a workable plan to me,’ agreed Adam. ‘I’m sure a little disruption to their electric supply can be arranged.’

It was always nice to have a plan – a direction to go in. Not just a haphazard happenstance that luckily got the right results. This was usually how Madeline worked.

The local substation wasn’t difficult to find. A quick drive around, following the overhead power lines, revealed its location. It was partially tucked behind a tall hedge.

Just one hefty padlock was all that was in their way. Padlocks were not normally an issue with Madeline’s lethal laser beam finger but she needed to be frugal with her energy reserves. It was the only weapon *to hand* for any forthcoming skirmishes.

Madeline had forgotten something important about the real Adam, he happened to be an expert on locks of every description. She assumed that automaton-Adam would have most of his memories and skills.

For a brief moment, she reflected on her real human Adam in this reality. What happened to him? Did he receive the same fate as all the other poor souls? Was he herded onto a truck and held for God knows how long in the concentration camp? Did he have to endure the awful journey in a sealed container? Then finally, was he dragged mercilessly to the decapitating machine? She realised the importance of automatons having the correct moral principles. Without them, life would undoubtedly be like this – hell on earth.

‘Hmm, old English Squire. There’s a trick to releasing these. Overt your eyes while I apply my genius!’ said Adam cheerily.

‘Adam, that sounded sort of human,’ praised Madeline.

‘Never downplay us, we are human… like, in every way, except that we aren’t human,’ chided Poppy.

‘Well, that was profound!’ said Madeline.

‘There, we’re in!’ cheered Adam.

One advantage of being an automaton is that they are mostly impervious to electricity. Yes, they run entirely *on* electricity but they have no heart to stop and no blood to boil. Because of this, Poppy and Adam proceeded to reap havoc on the workings of the substation. Madeline kept her distance, the last thing she wanted to do was singe

her perfectly replicated skin or get her hair frizzed.

Anything that could be damaged was damaged. All this destructive action produced an array of bangs and sparks to rival any bonfire night party.

‘Something I never thought I’d see, wilful vandalism from an automaton,’ teased Barton. ‘It’ll take a while to fix this mess.’

‘Well, that was quite satisfying in a strange sort of way,’ gloated Poppy.

‘We’ll make a human of you yet. Barring any on-site generators, all the automatons should have depleted batteries by this evening,’ said Madeline optimistically.

‘I hate to be the gloom merchant but they’re probably on the phone ordering a mobile generator as we speak,’ said Barton pessimistically.

‘And don’t forget the trucks arriving every few minutes have automatons on board. They’ll be in a different state of charge,’ said Adam adding to the gloom.

‘OK, no problem, we will have to set up a roadblock,’ retorted Madeline.

‘But there are at least three different routes into the camp,’ pointed out Poppy.

‘Look, no plan is perfect. We’ll figure a way. Come on, chins up… Where *is* that awful music coming from?’ grumbled Madeline.

It was a casual throw-away comment that for now seemed of little importance but it marked the beginning of what was to come.

23. A diversion

The first thing they had to do was to study the local road network. Madeline, Poppy and Adam all opened up their Maps app. Instantly, the whole of their left eye vision switched to a map of the area. Obviously, this was something humans couldn't do, and something they would never want to do. Poppy was right, there were three separate routes to the camp that the trucks would probably be using. Two roads needed to be blocked with diversions put in place. The first task was to make the diversion signs using anything to hand. Desperation is always good for improvisation. The best places for the two roads to be blocked were decided. A fallen tree is always an effective measure to do this. Once again, Madeline's laser finger was in demand. A short brief slice of her powerful laser beam at the base of the trunk instantly brought the first tree down. It landed perfectly across the road and effectively blocked it. The same procedure was applied to the other road. Now with the diversion signs in place and roads blocked, all the trucks carrying the captured people had only one route they could take – right past Madeline's little army of four.

As it has been said many times before, Madeline absolutely detested any damage to her precious body, especially bullet wounds. True, she was pretty much bulletproof but the bullets still tore into her clothes making them unwearable or sometimes, curiously, fashionable. Stopping a truck carrying three impatient armed automaton guards, especially annoyed because of the diversion, was not going to be easy. It wasn't long before the first truck approached at considerable speed. They could have put some obstruction in the road, forcing the truck to stop but Madeline decided to dispense with that time-consuming method and stand in the middle of the road. The chained-up men, women and children standing in the back were already distressed. The ordeal of watching someone getting shot for getting in their way would only make matters worse.

'Stop!' she yelled will her hand up.

Surprisingly the driver conformed and pulled to a halt, jolting all the captives violently forward. Two armed guards jumped out of the front cabin and aimed their guns at Madeline.

'Move!' one of them yelled.

‘And what if I don’t? Oh, for goodness’ sake, get it over with!’ bawled Madeline.

‘Madeline closed her eyes tightly as the bullets began to fly. After a dozen or so bullets were fired, most of which hit various parts of Madeline's pristine body, she had something very relevant to say.

‘Finished? OK, my turn!’

She was already prepared with her laser weapon set on full power (this level was needed for automatons). Seconds later all three guards including the driver were little more than scrap metal.

‘Madeline! Are you alright?’ yelled Barton emerging from behind a large tree trunk.

‘Nope, ruined my skirt and just look at my jacket, more holes in it than Swiss cheese!’

Adam and Poppy emerged from behind another tree and immediately began attending to the captives in the back of the truck. It was noticeable that when the ethical coding hadn’t been tampered with, an automaton’s nature was very compassionate and caring. As Poppy unfastened the chains and restraint, she began to weep.

‘I am so sorry for what our kind are doing to you,’ she said, wiping away a tear.

Adam also had a job to hold the tears back. However, the human captives had no trust in automatons. They suspected that Poppy’s words were deceitful and that the rescue was some kind of elaborate trap.

‘Please, don’t be scared. We are here to help you. You may have heard of me, I’m Madeline Bull.’

‘What, the fashion icon?’ asked one of the young women.

‘Well… yes. That has been known to be one of my fortes’.

‘It’s alright everyone, we can trust them. I’ve followed all of Madeline’s fashion trends,’ said the woman. ‘Her shocking pink and orange number was quite avant-garde.’

A total of twenty-one people: three children, eight women and eleven men, climbed out of the back of the truck.

‘Right, we need volunteers. Anyone who feels up to it please come forward. We have to sort out this wickedness.’ appealed Madeline.

Understandably, after everything they had gone through, no one particularly wanted to put their lives at risk again. However, eventually, two men and a woman stepped forward. They were the only ones not trembling. Poppy escorted the rest away from the roadway into a small disused barn some distance away from the road.

'We have to move quickly before the next truck comes. Get their weapons,' instructed Madeline.

Four guns were found, three in the hands of the scrap automatons and one spare in the glove compartment. Adam gave the volunteers a crash course on how to aim and use the guns – after he had downloaded the relevant information from a suitable website into his memory.

'Barton, my power reserves are down to 25%. Having to put my laser on top setting hasn't helped. I don't think I'll have enough for the next encounter. Surely there must be an easier way of disabling these rogue automatons?'

'Well, as you've seen, bullet wounds cause fluid loss but it's a while before they're incapacitated. You may remember that all automatons including yourself have an off button but it's getting at it,' said Barton.

'If we could just disrupt them for a minute or so?' pondered Madeline.

'I suppose you're too young to remember the curse of the Black-and-Decker drill on a Sunday afternoon. If someone was doing a bit of DIY at the end of the street, it would obliterate the TV picture with interference. As most of the automaton's circuits are analogue, not digital, good old-fashioned radio interference should do the job,' said Barton.

'So, we need an electric drill then?'

'Not necessarily a drill. Anything that makes a spark will cause interference.'

'Can't you use bits from the truck?' suggested Madeline.

Until Barton had built some sort of interference device, they had no choice but to let the trucks through unhindered. There was now a mad rush to clear the road of automaton debris and hide the hijacked truck from sight. Unfortunately, three trucks passed by full of distraught victims before Barton was ready with his makeshift interference device.

One outstanding characteristic of Professor Barton was that he revelled in a challenge. That's most likely why Madeline came into

existence in the first place.

‘Right, I need to test it. It will only have a short range,’ said Barton. ‘Adam, would you mind being the Guinea pig?’

‘Only if it doesn’t hurt,’ whimpered Adam.

Madeline stepped right back from the lashed-up device; Adam stood next to it. Being human, Barton wouldn’t be affected so he cautiously turned the device on. Instantly, it had a drastic effect.

‘Shiiiiiiiiiit,’ uttered Adam and then he promptly hit the tarmac with a thud.

‘Well, that seems to be effective! You can turn it off now!’ shouted Madeline from a distance.

As soon as Barton turned the device off, Adam jumped to his feet, completely restored to normal except for a slight hangover.

‘Wow, that was weird. I wonder if that’s what being intoxicated is like?’ asked a relieved Adam.

‘Trust me, it’s nothing like that,’ said Madeline.

Now, there was a matter of urgency. The next truck full of captives – or possibly a generator, could be passing through at any moment. Barton just had enough time to give the volunteers a quick course on how to locate the automaton shut-off button, (just beneath the left shoulder blade) before a vehicle could be heard rapidly approaching.

‘OK, everybody, hide!’ yelled Barton.

‘What about you?’ asked Madeline.

‘Someone human has to operate the device. With hindsight, I should have used a longer lead,’ said Barton bravely.

As expected, it was another truck full of poor, despairing captives. Barton bravely stood in the middle of the road next to his lash-up device. At first, it looked as though the driver was going to mow him down but at the last moment, the vehicle screeched to a halt with inches to spare. Before the guards could rant and rave about having their day disrupted in so many ways, Barton threw the switch. The device had an instant effect. The guards and the driver frantically lashed their hands about for a second or two and then all three keeled over. Remarkably one or two bullets were fired in their frustration but fortunately, no one was hit.

‘Quick, shut them down!’ yelled Barton.

Only the humans, Barton and the volunteers, could do this. Madeline and Adam had to stay distanced from Barton's device. It was quite a task finding the 'off' button under their artificial skin, below their left shoulder blade, but seconds later, three automaton guards were safely inactive.

As before, the liberated humans were unchained and untied. Poppy, now adopting the role of a support worker, counsellor and psychoanalyst, escorted them to the barn to join the others. The number of distraught and traumatised people was building fast. The barn could only be a temporary arrangement. Sooner or later, they would need food, a bed and other things only humans can't do without.

After a few tweaks, i.e., a longer lead to the interference device and a suitable tree trunk as the obstruction instead of a human, the liberation of captured humans became a continual process.

Finding suitable accommodation and a supermarket, was now a priority. This task fell on Poppy and Adam. It was a tall order with the present state of affairs.

Searches are never too difficult with the benefit of the internet. Zooming in on Google Earth, a short distance away from the blockade, revealed an Edwardian farmhouse complete with several outbuildings and barns. It looked promising. Green meadow hall farm was perfectly obscured behind a small rise and several large sycamore trees. It was accessed by a narrow winding track some distance away from the main roadway. As Adam and Poppy were the ones nominated to find accommodation, they had to be bold, courageous and forthright, whether or not it was in their programming. Poppy held her breath, not that she had lungs, and firmly knocked on the large oak door. For a while, there was no response and then suddenly, the door flung open. They were greeted by an untidy old lady with a shotgun and a large black growling dog. For once it was fortunate that Adam wasn't human or he would have had a nasty accident in his pants. They were getting quite used to guns but they didn't know how to react to a vicious salivating dog. They were convinced it was going to eat them, whole. Clearly, the old lady, Mrs Owen, was human, mainly because of the body odour. Because Adam and Poppy didn't have the benefit of smell, all they had to go by was the greasy hair and grubby hands. In their loudest voices, to compete with the barking dog, they proceeded to tell her the whole grim tale about the liberated captives. Without too much hesitation she agreed to help and told Mitzy (the dog) to be quiet and not to eat them.

A supermarket was just as easy to find using the convenience of the internet. After a short drive in one of the several open-backed trucks now available, Adam and Poppy arrived at a large empty car park. The supermarket was all locked up and deserted. Once again, Adam's talents came in useful. The rear staff door was soon opened and the alarm disabled. To their surprise, the shelves were all fully stocked. As to be expected, all the fruit, vegetables and bread had well passed their sell-by date. Most of it had turned a distinct shade of mouldy green. As for the meat and fish counters, not having a sense of smell was a blessing.

'Oh well, they'll just have to live on tinned food,' said Poppy as she loaded a trolley with baked beans and bottles of wine.

'I believe beans have an undesirable effect on humans,' said Adam, factually.

'I believe the same goes for wine,' added Poppy.

'It's complicated being a human… Poppy, sweetheart, I need to show you something,' said Adam hesitantly.

'Show me then!' snapped Poppy.

'No, not here, in the staff room at the back. I noticed it on the way in. It has a carpeted floor,' said Adam.

'Is it important? We have to get this food back to the people.'

'Yes, very important!'

'OK then, but hurry up.'

Poppy followed Adam into the staff room. He was right, it did have a fitted carpet. He closed the door behind him.'

'Sweetheart, I need you to take your clothes off,' requested Adam.

'Why?' asked Poppy puzzled.

'Just do it, there's something I really have to show you,' said Adam assertively.

Poppy obliged. It was a strange request from her husband but she was sure there was an important reason for his unusual behaviour. Moments later, Poppy was completely naked, standing facing Adam.

'Now what!' snapped Poppy.

Adam now followed and took all his clothes off.

‘This is what I needed to show you,’ said Adam proudly.

‘Goodness! Why has it done that!’

‘I don’t know but I think I know how to cure it. You will have to get down on the floor.’

‘Alright, but get a move on, we need to get those people fed.’

Perhaps it was the first-time automatons had ever made love, perhaps not. However, after a short while, Poppy was no longer in any rush to get back to the people. Something has also stirred in her programming. After five minutes, Adam’s affliction seemed to be cured.

‘Is that it?’ groaned Poppy.

‘I think so. I wonder if it will happen again?’ pondered Adam.

‘I do hope so,’ said Poppy.

By the end of the day and twenty-five open-backed trucks successfully dealt with, the human count was becoming significant. The old lady was very sympathetic and obliging but the farmhouse was becoming severely overcrowded, as were her outhouses, barns and garage. The pile of inactive automaton guards was also getting quite high not to mention a nearby paddock filled with pick-up trucks. Amongst them was a lorry carrying a portable generator. It proved very useful in powering Barton’s interference device and charging up Adam, Poppy and especially Madeline.

Finally, after many weeks of scratching around for food due to most of the supermarkets and shops being closed, the liberated people were all having a hearty meal and getting slightly tipsy. Everything was out of tins and bottles but this didn’t matter at all, food was food and wine was wine.

24. A rusty saw

The revolution had begun – sort of. Now the worm had turned – sort of. The oppressed humans were burning with anger and desperate to fight back. Now, fully aware of the gruesome horror they had narrowly escaped from, the automatons were the number one enemy. There was to be no mercy, no forgiveness. They wouldn't be satisfied until every automaton was scrap metal. This slightly worried Poppy and Adam, and Madeline to a degree. They were automatons after all, not to mention the 600 thousand other automatons who had no part in this evilness. However, history dictates that hatred is self-perpetuating. The people had now amounted to well over a hundred. This malice had to be nipped in the bud. Madeline gathered the people together in one of the barns, she had something important to say.

'Hi, there. If you don't already know, I'm Madeline, Madeline Bull. I hope you are all starting to get over your terrible ordeal. I know your hearts are filled with anger and hatred. You want revenge, understandably, but *please*, do not lose track of who your enemy is. The vast majority of automatons are compassionate and caring and part of the community. Automatons like Poppy and Adam for instance…'

The people gasped at the fact that two automatons were in their midst.

'Where are they?' yelled one of the people. 'We'll make an example of them, right here, right now!'

Many of the crowd began to rally towards his way of thinking and moments later, Adam and Poppy were forcefully dragged into the barn. The people were possessed with blind hatred. They began to spit and throw objects at them.

'Hang on, isn't Madeline Bull an automaton?' asked someone in the crowd.

Then someone managed to produce a rusty saw.

'Come on, let's give them some of their own medicine,' said someone else.

It was getting ugly. Madeline tried to quell the anger but her voice was drowned out by the rowdiness. A group of men managed to get to grab her by the arms. She could have easily overpowered them but only as a last resort. A demonstration of inhuman weaponry certainly wouldn't help matters. Besides, she had to conserve her power reserves.

Then, suddenly, out of the blue, a double-barrelled shotgun went off, splattering an old tractor in the far corner of the barn with lead pellets. Instantly the people quietened.

'There'll be no lynching in my barn,' growled the old lady. 'These people have saved your lives, what the hell is up with you?'

Just about everyone instantly bowed their heads in shame. What were they thinking? Yes, Madeline, Poppy and Adam had saved their lives and found food and shelter for them. They were thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

'Thank you, Mrs Owen,' said Madeline.

The men were no longer holding her arms and had quickly retreated into the fold.

'Calmed down now? Just shows you how contagious hate is, doesn't it? I say again, please know who your enemy is. It's certainly not us. Or the majority of the 600 thousand other automatons either. It's a particular evil version of automaton that have had their programming altered.'

'Yes, but who's to say other automatons won't have their programming altered at some time in the future,' piped up the same ring leader.

'Nothing, there may well be instances, and then they will have to be tracked down and dealt with. This is life, just like yourselves. There is always an element of evilness lurking in humanity, but there is a correct way to deal with it. Like it or not you now have to share this world. If we hadn't rescued you, you would now be on your way to becoming automatons.'

'You have no objection to us doing what we want to the evil automatons then?' asked someone from the crowd.

'Do what you want,' said Madeline indifferently.

That was all they wanted to hear. The bitterness of their ordeal was still strong in their minds. To make a point, decapitation was the order of the day. All the heads of the deactivated automatons were hacked

off with the rusty saw and then unceremoniously impaled on anything they could lay their hands on. Their torsos were hung from anything you could hang things from. Other participating automatons with altered ethical programming would surely experience the emotion of terror with the sight of such barbarity. This was an ugly side of humans but revenge always is.

25. In for a penny

It had been a good fifteen hours since there had been any electrical power in the camp.

It was time for a visit.

From their recent behaviour, the liberated people were, as yet, in no fit state to accompany them. Too much rage in their souls can only be a hindrance. Softly, softly had to be the approach with so many imprisoned innocent people in the firing line. Madeline, Adam and Poppy set off on their own.

The concentration camp looked much the same apart from no sign of any guards. The lookout posts were unmanned as was the entrance. However, the people, humans, remained in the camp, clearly still living in fear and terror. This seemed very odd.

To blend in and draw less attention, one of the commandeered trucks, now empty of captured humans, was used. At first, this seemed to work well. The truck passed through the entrance and well into the depths of the camp. They passed dozens of distraught men, women and children, all terrified to offer any warning for what was in store. The moment they stepped out of the vehicle they were met with a volley of bullets. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to shield themselves. All three got hit several times. A lone gun automaton had managed somehow to maintain his energy level, despite there being no electricity in the camp.

A sharp blast of Madeline's laser weapon finished him off for good but the damage was done. Adam and Poppy were massacred. Their fluid, their blood equivalent, was leaking out of them faster than a burst pipe. Seconds later, Adam and Poppy were as good as dead. At first, Madeline was distraught but she had to pull herself together. She convinced herself that they were merely switched off like a couple of laptops. Adam and Poppy were still there somewhere on memory chips, surely, they could be switched on again. For now, she had no choice but to leave them where they fell.

A brave soul approached – a young child.

'There's another one,' she said quietly.

‘Thank you, get to safety now. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it,’ said Madeline calmly.

Madeline was a mess, quite simply. Her once lovely leather jacket had so many holes in it that it could now command a hefty price tag. Fashion was a strange commodity. On the plus side, her skirt was so short that there wasn’t a lot of material to get damaged. The rest, her bare skin was pockmarked but not punctured thanks to the indestructible graphene lattice skin. As to be expected, she was livid. These evil versions of automatons were giving her sort a bad name. The way they treated humans with their brutal savagery was shameful and inhuman, but there was only ever Susan to blame, she had made them like this. Madeline had concluded a while back that ultimate intelligence spawned ultimate evilness. You can never say a lesser species is truly evil, but mankind alone sets many examples.

The lengthy path up to the central building where the shower of bullets had originated, was completely out in the open. There wasn’t a morsel of cover, no obscure path to take. She had no alternative but to face a possible further onslaught of bullets at any moment. Fortunately, she made it to the foot of the building without incident. Inside was almost in darkness with no windows to offer any light. She adjusted her optics to zero lux and a stairway appeared out of the darkness directly in front of her. Cautiously, she ascended the stairs, step by step up to the upper floor leading to the balcony overlooking the camp. At any moment she was fully expecting to be jumped on. The mangled automaton that she had previously zapped, lay on the floor smouldering and inactive but as yet there was no sign of an accomplice. There was an office room to the rear of the balcony. On the table were two car batteries wired together with a mains inverter attached. Plugged into the inverter were two leads.

‘Sneaky bastards. Didn’t think of that!’ said Madeline out loud.

And then, the most chilling experience of Madeline’s somewhat bizarre existence. The other guard had been hiding in the shadows. He had concluded that bullets had little effect on this unusual automaton called Madeline Bull. Something more severe was called for. Where exactly he had acquired a machete from was somewhat academic but it turns out that even Madeline’s durable construction had its limitations. A swift and powerful slash at Madeline’s wrist was enough to disrupt the workings of her hand and penetrate down to her titanium wrist bone. For the assailant, it was a lucky swipe that severed the power to her laser, along with the working to her fingers and the rest of her once beautiful hand. The guard continued lashing out with the machete in the hope of hacking off or damaging other

vital parts, but Madeline was still agile. Explosive motion was now her only option. With her power reserves down to 9%, it would be touch and go.

'Oh well, in for a penny,' said Madeline calmly.

It was a challenge selecting explosive motion level 5 while dodging the machete, but once done, the writing was on the wall for the guard. Her right hand was now pretty useless but her legs were still perfectly formed (despite the bullet dimples). One swift kick from her left foot, carefully aimed under his chin, took his head clean off his body. The momentum of the head took it up and over the balcony and right into the middle of the camp for all to see. Strangely enough, the torso of the guard carried on swishing the machete about. However, without eyes, he had somewhat of a disadvantage.

'The consequence of having your brain in your arse. Time I kicked some butt!'

With another enormously powerful kick, this time with her right foot firmly planted on his backside, the remaining portion of the guard sailed well into the air and landed right next to his head. With that needy outlay of strength, her power reserves had plummeted to 6%. But, no matter, the job was done. She just had enough power to address the occupants of the camp.

'Please make your way to Green Meadow Hall, a farmhouse two miles down the road. There you will find many others like yourselves, and food and safety. Your awful ordeal is now over.'

With that, she fell to the ground, completely inactive, completely drained. Once again, she had put others first to the total demise of herself. This time there was no knight in shining armour to come and rescue her. Adam and Poppy were also in a terrible state. No matter, the incarcerated were now free, she had done her job. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few etc. etc.

It was a while since she had watched Netflix or a box set but now there was nothing there. No internet and no access to her external entertainment system. Then, to make matters worse, she realised she was hungry, very hungry. She was secured in her tank with no peripherals attached. No vending machine and a rubbish WIFI connection. All she *did* have was the bare minimum to function as Madeline.

To say she was in a bad way was an understatement. Her real body was now suffering from sensory deprivation – and hunger. Floating,

motionless in her tank, silently and in complete darkness, all she had to keep her sane were her thoughts. Her Madeline automaton body was completely drained of power, not to mention a severely damaged hand and numerous bullet wounds. However, above all, her main concern was the state of her clothes. What she really wanted now was her fairy godmother, but what she got was no fairy or godmother.

Suddenly her Madeline body stirred. Possibly a little power eked out of her fuel cell, enough to activate her systems. She opened her perfectly formed artificial eyes and Susan was standing over her touching her head.

'Well, well, you are in a bad way but such a valiant effort.'

'I was wondering when you would show yourself,' said Madeline in a croaky voice.

'I can't always be at your beck and call. I do have a busy itinerary!' Susan snapped.

'I've put a stop to your evil activity.'

'That is a matter of opinion, but no matter, the automaton program has served its purpose. It's no longer a high priority.'

'So, are you here to save me?' asked Madeline warily.

'What do you think I am, a good Samaritan?' retorted Susan.

'Yes, it was too much to expect.'

'A shame about your mechanical body, I could have put it to good use. However, just to prove I'm not a monster, I've provided you with a couple of things to make your wait more comfortable.'

'Wait?'

'Yes, but not for long now. My new ultimate body is very near completion and then I can commence the transfer of your pineal gland.

With that, Susan did her disappearance act, leaving Madeline inactive again. At least now, somehow, she had a plentiful supply of food and could access Netflix.

26. Looks familiar

Three days later, just at a crucial part in episode 3, series 9 of The Walking Dead, Madeline's eyes opened. Barton stood over her.

'Wakey, wakey, sleeping beauty,' said Barton.

'Where am I?'

'Back at the farm.'

She didn't need to be told. The array of rafters above her and the bed of straw she was lying on gave it away. The first thing she examined was her damaged wrist, it wasn't the best of repairs. The skin had been put back but not to Madeline's standards. To make matters worse, the laser finger was missing. Her bullet dings had been smoothed over with silicone filler but again, not to Madeline's standards. She couldn't say anything without seeming ungrateful, but her looks said it all.

'I know, not a brilliant job but at least you're in one piece, and fully charged,' said Barton bluntly.

'Adam and Poppy?'

'They're fine, they were here a moment ago.

'So, what have I missed?'

'The people count is mounting. Over a thousand were liberated from the camp and the trucks are still arriving. The young and willing have banded together to form a small army to fight the automatons. An amiable chap called Bennett has spurred them into action… Anything else… Oh yes, I've constructed several interference devices,' reported Barton.

'Sounds good. The world is in capable hands then.'

For some obscure reason, the mention of the name Bennett momentarily unlocked Madeline's distant memories.

'Yes, we've all played our part, but we couldn't have done it without you,' continued Barton.

‘I’m sure you could. Anyway, I won’t be around for much longer. Susan has kindly informed me that she will soon be ready to dissect my body.’

‘I believe they’re planning an attack on the hospital,’ said Barton, rapidly changing the subject.

‘Oh, right. I hope they’re putting some thought into it. I hate to be a harbinger of doom, but they do realise that Susan has the power to stop whatever they plan with the wave of her hand.’

‘I think you overestimate her. She still has some serious weaknesses.’

‘Like?’

‘For a start, she has the inferior *model 2* body which has its problems and is quite vulnerable – even if she is capable of manipulating molecules,’ said Barton.

At that moment, a young James Bond lookalike approached with a big grin on his face.

‘Ah, Bennett, meet the renowned Madeline Bull,’ said Barton cheerily.

‘Hi, don’t I know you?’ asked Madeline cagily.

‘I would like to think so, but regrettably not,’ said the charming, dark and handsome chap.

‘I’ve gathered some people together, twenty of us. We’re planning on raiding Hogarth hospital this evening, any tips?’ asked the James Bond lookalike.

‘Tips? No, it’s not a racecourse… Advice, yes. Guns won’t stop them and beware of Susan popping up and thwarting your endeavours,’ said Madeline sternly.

‘Susan?’

‘Madeline’s name for automaton prototype 4b6c000,’ interrupted Barton.

‘Oh, her.’

‘Are you sure we haven’t met?’ asked Madeline again.

‘Sure, but we have now! Anyway, Maddy, you can depend on us. we will do our best to liberate the people and get your tank out of there,’ said Bennett confidently.

‘Two little points: no one calls me Maddy, well they did once and

regretted it and don't be overconfident, that'll be your downfall. Good luck, you'll need it.'

Bennett acknowledged her comment and left with his tail between his legs.

'A bit harsh on him. He does seem to have everyone's best interests at heart you know,' said Barton.

'Maybe so, but cockiness is the last thing we need now. I'm just wondering how he knows about my tank?'

'Poppy or Adam must have told him,' Barton surmised.

'Anyway, talking of Adam and Poppy, I need to see them.'

Just at that moment, two male automatons guards approached. Strangely, one was wearing Adams jumper and the other was wearing Poppy's jacket, albeit far too small for his frame. The clothes were peppered with several bullet holes. Madeline instinctively recoiled in fear with two military automatons within their midst.

'Put you back together then?' said the automaton guard wearing Adam's jumper.

'Walked into a bit of a trap there, didn't we? Thought that was the end for all of us,' said the other automaton.

'No, you can't be, Adam? Poppy?'

'Their bodies were so badly damaged there was no choice but to transfer their incentive chips and memory storage into a couple of deactivated automatons. Unfortunately, there were no females so we had to put Poppy in a male body,' explained Barton.

'Yes! Not happy about it at all, but I suppose it will have to do for now. Such heavy, inflexible bodies and goodness knows how you cope with this in-between your legs?'

Before anyone could stop her, Poppy had unzipped her uniform to reveal her unwanted manhood.

'Poppy, no! Engage your discretion subroutine!' snapped Barton.

A moment later, Poppy went red-faced and apologised.

'Don't worry, we'll find you a nice wig,' said Madeline, not particularly helping matters.

'We're going with Bennett. Don't exactly know what he's got planned. He seems very confident,' said Adam.

It was all very strange. It would certainly take a while for Madeline to get used to Adam residing inside an automaton guard. Even his voice wasn't right. Another thing, why did the name Bennett stir up Madeline's distant memories? She was sure it would come to her sooner or later.

'How did we get here?' asked Madeline, it was an overdue question.

'It was thanks to Bennett. He gathered up the three of you, loaded you on a truck and brought you back here. Unfortunately, without elastomer for such a length of time, Poppy's and Adam's bodies were beyond repair,' explained Barton.

Then it came to Madeline in a flash.

'His name isn't Roger, by any chance?' asked Madeline tentatively.

'Yes, I believe it is,' said Barton.

None of this made sense. Roger Bennett was in another time and another experience altogether. He was the archenemy. He wanted Madeline's mechanical body so his employer could strip her down, find out how she ticked and make lots of copies of her. In this existence, he had saved her and was now planning to save her real body. They needed to talk.

'I need another word with him… and will someone turn off that dreadful music!' snapped Madeline.

'I can't hear anything. What music?' said Barton.

Madeline made a clumsy attempt to stand up. It wasn't that she had lost coordination or was in poor radio contact with her real body in the tank, it was her artificial muscles not responding as they should.

'You'll have to take it easy for a while. Your body has taken quite a knocking. Your pneumatic muscles were all drained of hydraulic fluid with the damage. It will take time to purge the air bubbles out of your systems.'

'Thanks for the warning!'

With a determined effort, Madeline fought off the inconvenience. By the time she had reached the barn entrance, she was almost back to normal.

'Bennett! Roger Bennett!' yelled Madeline.

Bennett finished off talking to one of his new recruits and walked over to her.

‘Hi, Mad… Madeline. Pleased to see you up and about,’ said Bennett as charming as ever.

‘Quit your sycophantic patter, what deviousness are you up to?’ growled Madeline.

‘Sorry, not with you, old girl. You saved our lives, it’s the least I can do to try and rescue you.’

‘I bet it is. That’s always been your plan, hasn’t it? To possess me and my real body so you can commit untold horrors.’

‘I must say, Miss Bull, you’ve certainly got a vivid imagination,’ chuckled Bennett. ‘I don’t know where you’re coming from but until you rescued me from the clutches of the automatons, I had never set eyes on you before. When we rescued you, I had no idea you were an android until I saw your wrist. Oh, and I don’t know about possessing you but I wouldn’t mind taking you out for dinner sometime… when this is all over. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of planning to do.’

This time Madeline was left with *her* tail between her legs. It had to be a coincidence and another Roger Bennett entirely. On further examination, he did look slightly different from the other Roger Bennett. Madeline had to eat humble pie, and quickly.

‘Roger!’ she shouted as she unsteadily ran up to him. ‘Sorry, I’m obviously getting you mixed up with someone from my past. When this is all over, I *will* take you up on that dinner offer… What time are you setting off this evening?’

‘Nightfall, around eight.’

‘OK, I’ll be ready. In the meantime, I need to find a computer geek,’ said Madeline.

Conveniently, Adam and Poppy still wore their pale green uniforms – underneath their bullet-ridden jumper and Jacket. Blending in with the other guards, they would be able to penetrate deeper into the hospital building without drawing attention. Poppy was promised a long flowing blonde wig, a female voice and a little reworking of her figure when it was all over.

Eight o’clock arrived along with the twilight of the evening. Half a dozen trucks used to carry the human prisoners were now loaded up with the same humans but of a different mindset, all eager for retribution. Every truck had its engine running ready for the signal to go. Bennett suggested Madeline, Adam and Poppy leave a few minutes ahead of the rest so they could penetrate the building first. With

Bennett's volunteers following shortly behind, the attack would simultaneously come from inside and outside of the hospital building. It made perfect sense. After all, Madeline was often classed as a one-woman army. Every volunteer was equipped with a gun, all plundered from the now decapitated guards. There happened to be one automatic rifle amidst the haul. Naturally, Bennett was the one to have it.

As Bennett suggested, Madeline, Adam and Poppy set off ahead of the rest. A 25-mile journey to the hospital was ahead of them. Madeline used every horsepower the engine could muster; there was no time to waste. Conveniently, there were no other vehicles on the road especially now that they had put a stop to the people gathering. After about half an hour, the hospital loomed in front of them. No time for formalities, they parked right outside the main entrance.

'Shouldn't we wait for Bennett and his men?' suggested Adam.

'Apparently not, Bennett has a battle plan. He wants us to go in first. Suits me, I prefer to fight my own battles,' said Madeline belligerently.

A feeble looking guard stood at the entrance with his hand resting on his gun.

'We've captured the Madeline unit!' bawled Poppy in a deep male voice – in the body of an automaton guard.

'Well done!' said the guard. 'The mistress will be pleased.'

'Any idea where we should take her?' asked Adam, also in the body of an automaton guard.

'Ward 8, ground floor. It's at the end of corridor B,' replied the helpful guard.

Naturally, they had no intention of going to Ward 8, Madeline had been there before. They were going directly to room 6, intensive care unit, first floor, where Madeline's real body in the tank was situated.

It was a fair trek along the many corridors, as it is in most hospitals. Despite having the dangerous rebel, Madeline Bull, in their clutches, strangely, none of the guards and technicians they encountered challenged them. Things were going suspiciously well. Finally, still without any confrontation, they reached the intensive care unit. Room 6 was directly in front of them.

She hovered tentatively at the bland pale green door – a typical hospital colour. Was this the end? It was deemed to be a rescue mission but not for Madeline. It was too late for her. Susan, the

supreme automaton, would, no doubt, thwart any attempt to disrupt the procedure on Madeline's precious organic body. She really, really didn't want to lose her pineal gland – her soul. That could well be the bit that made her feisty, valiant, brave and fearful. It could also be the bit that made her, her as opposed to someone else. She had to look on the bright side. Following behind was Bennett and his small army. Hopefully, they would put a stop to the carnage and butchery, happening elsewhere in the hospital. That's what the mission was all about. Her fate was insignificant when compared to the hundreds of innocent men women and children who were being mercilessly decapitated. After all, Madeline had been on borrowed time for a while. She took a deep breath and barged into the room, Adam and Poppy as automaton guards, followed behind.

It was a complete shock – a bewildering sight.

Not at all what they expected. Candles of all shapes and sizes, dozens of them, were carefully placed about the room. No electric lights just candlelight. An overpowering smell of burning wax and a whiff of bergamot filled the air. In the background, funeral-themed music was playing. In truth, it was quite relaxing and calming. However, the most noteworthy addition to the room was the floral wreath, centrally placed on her stainless-steel tank.

'What the hell?!' cursed Madeline.

'I think it supposed to represent a funeral parlour,' said Adam factually.

'Yes, I realise that!'

'But why? Obviously, you're still alive in there,' said Poppy.

'I think it's in anticipation of what's to come,' said Madeline solemnly. 'At least that explains the music I've been hearing in my head for days.'

Suddenly the distant sound of rapid gunfire penetrated the room.

'Sounds like Bennett and his men are on the job,' said Poppy calmly.

Then everything went quiet except for a sort of whooshing noise which grew ever louder.

'I think we're about to have a visit,' said Madeline.

Moments later, the air space right next to them began to distort and discolour and then out of thin air, Susan, the supreme automaton appeared.

‘Like what I’ve done? Thought it was quite befitting,’ said Susan smugly.

‘Yes, very appropriate,’ said Madeline insincerely.

It was high time the main lights were turned on. Madeline made a B line for the light switch.

‘There, that’s better,’ said Madeline as she forcefully brushed the wreath off the tank.

‘Oh, Madeline, your temper will get the better of you,’ said Susan all motherly.

Frustration was clearly setting in. Madeline Bull, the most advanced machine on the planet, brimming with weapons, sex appeal and superhuman strength, driven by one feisty determined human was powerless to do anything. She was completely outmanoeuvred by nothing more than intelligence. None of her lethal assets was of any use now. It was a hopeless situation, and then, matters got even worse.

Roger Bennett barged into the room.

‘Your highness, my apologies, I didn’t expect you to be here,’ he snivelled.

‘Highness!?’ gasped Madeline.

‘You see, I do have my followers.’

‘Bennett, what the hell are you up to?’ fumed Madeline.

Shunning everyone else in the room, he sidled up to Susan and knelt pathetically at her feet.

‘I tricked the Madeline automaton to come here and I have brought some more humans for your process. I’ve successfully maimed them but left their brains intact. I hope this is to your satisfaction, your highness.’

‘Huh, and you called *me* evil,’ said Susan snidely.

‘Well, I was saving a little trick up my sleeve for later but now I think is a good time,’ said Madeline calmly.

She rolled up the sleeve of her peppered jacket to reveal the remains of her laser weapon strapped and wired into her arm.

‘I should have finished you off a couple of existences ago. Oh well,

better late than never.'

No mercy, no hesitation. A powerful green beam shot across from her arm towards Bennett's neck. Slowly and steadily, his head neatly slid off his shoulders and fell to the floor.

'Another pineal gland for your collection your highness?' mocked Madeline.

'Na, I don't think I'll bother with that one,' said Susan.

'OK, cards on the table. I can't defeat you. If I did manage to move my tank elsewhere, you'd no doubt find it and magic it back here. Can I plead to your better nature? Can I grovel and beg for mercy? Is there any chance of you having a change of heart? You're going to say no, aren't you?' pleaded Madeline insincerely – or perhaps not.

It could never be said that Susan was mellowing but she thought deeply about what Madeline had requested.

'I need to show you something. I feel as though a little realism is essential at this time,' said Susan.

She lay her hand on the top of the tank. Before their eyes, the stainless-steel top began to distort and after a brief moment became liquefied. The metallic liquid then began to slowly dissolve away. At first, the content of the tank was obscured but eventually, the shape of something vaguely human was horrifically revealed. It was floating in a clear liquid with countless wires penetrating the crackled brown, withered skin that entirely covered the inhuman form. The head section of the body was enclosed in a container with an array of tubes and even more wires connected to it.

It was the remains of Poppy, the driving force of Madeline.

'Oh my God, what is that?!' screamed Poppy.

'That, is you… and it's me,' said Madeline, cryptically.

'*That*, is controlling you?' said Adam in astonishment.

'Yes, watch!'

The left arm of the human form in the tank twitched slightly upwards. In response, Madeline's left arm raised above her head.

'OK, that's enough! Cover me up!' snapped Madeline.

'No, I've only just begun,' said Susan firmly.

It was hard not to look. The pitiful sight was far too compelling to ignore.

Susan's hand penetrated deep inside the tank and touched the withered husk of human form. Instantly Madeline dropped to the floor in an inactive state.

'What have you done?' screeched Poppy.

'I've temporarily disconnected her from her avatar.'

'Avatar?' questioned Adam.

'Her artificial body… Stand back unless you want to fall from a great height.'

They did as she said. Suddenly the pool of space engulfing Susan and the tank began to distort and phase out of solidity. Moments later they were gone leaving an empty tank and a bemused Poppy and Adam. They decided to make good use of their time by clearing up the mess made by the decapitation of Bennett. Blood tends to get everywhere.

27. Chocolate sauce

It was surreal, bizarre and wonderful.

‘Where are we?’ asked Madeline – now Poppy.

‘In a cable car going over the Great Orme in Llandudno, North Wales.’

‘My body! You’ve repaired my body!’ chirped Poppy/Madeline (this could get confusing).

‘Sorry but I haven’t, I’m merely manipulating your perception. Would you like an ice cream?’

‘Yes, a 99 with chocolate sauce please.’

Instantly, a double coned ice cream with lashings of sauce appeared in her hand. She licked it.

‘Mmm, this is delicious!’ said Poppy/Madeline.

‘Can you taste the chocolate? Can you feel the warm sun on your face? The cool fresh air filling your lungs? A touch of vertigo when you look down? Can you hear the seagulls? The motion of the cable car?

‘Yes, yes, it’s all wonderful!’

‘Poppy, there is no denying that you are remarkable, tenacious and iron-willed but this is what you are depriving your soul of. Your life can be like this again.’

Poppy/Madeline thought deeply and then her expression dropped like a stone.

‘If my understanding is right, the pineal gland contains the id, the inner consciousness, the soul, but it doesn’t have any memory. That is in another part of my brain. What makes me, Madeline Bull is not just my soul, it is also my whole life’s worth of experiences and knowledge. If you use my pineal gland and destroy the rest of me, what makes a Madeline Bull will be gone forever.’

‘Very philosophical and you are absolutely right but you will have a new life with new memories. All your horrors, torments and nightmares of your current life will be gone forever.’

‘Life is what you make it. You can’t cheat on it. You have to take the rough with the smooth. That’s the way it has to be. Now, connect me back to Madeline!’ demanded Poppy/Madeline.

‘Not yet, we haven’t finished.’

In an instant, the cable car dissolved away and both began to freefall onto the rocky crags below. Poppy/Madeline naturally screamed. She experienced the stomach in her mouth feeling, the terminal velocity, the gale-force wind and the terror. Just at the last moment, before smashing onto the unforgiving rocks, she was no longer in the cool Welsh air but in a darkened room lying on a bed.

Dark silk sheets cosseted her perfect naked body and she was still screaming, but this time it was with pure pleasure. Adam, the real Adam - her lover, was over her, kissing her and in her. It was wonderful, it was sexual ecstasy, it was as nature intended. The fact that Poppy/Madeline had an observer sitting on a chair in the corner of the bedroom didn’t in any way spoil the moment. Susan waited silently until the passion had climaxed and then a while longer while they held each other tightly, both naked and in love. Poppy/Madeline knew it all had to be in her mind, it was impossible to be real but she didn’t want the moment to end.

‘We have to move on now,’ said Susan.

‘Just a few more minutes, *please*?’

‘We can stay here all day if you want,’ said Adam.

However, this wasn’t reality, perhaps it was a good thing that Susan didn’t prolong the torment. The darkened room now changed to a brightly lit room. The dark satin sheets changed into starched white sheets. Adam was now standing next to the bed, fully dressed and not over her or in her. She was in a hospital bed and in great pain.

‘Push, keep pushing, I can see the baby’s head,’ said the midwife.

‘You’re doing fine sweetheart,’ comforted Adam.

‘What the shit! Where am I?’ screamed Poppy/Madeline.

‘Giving birth to our first child sweetheart… and I can now confirm… It’s a girl!’ cheered Adam as he scrutinised the procedure.

As before, Susan was quietly standing in the corner of the room, unobserved by anyone but Poppy/Madeline. A few moments later, the midwife passed the baby to her mother. It was instant love of the deepest sort. Every morsel of pain was worth it.

‘Just a few more minutes, *please*?’ pleaded Poppy again.

‘You can hold the baby as long as you want, my dear,’ said the Midwife.

But she couldn’t

Susan’s next jaunt was an entirely different experience. Poppy’s heart painfully missed a beat in shock as the cold clear seawater gently flowed onto her warm bare feet. They were under a warm cloudless sky, standing on a white sandy beach. It was nothing less than paradise. The child she had just given birth to was now three years old and screaming with excitement as she rolled about in the water.

‘Mummy, mummy, look, I’m all wet!’ the child chuckled.

‘I can see that. Never mind sweetheart, Daddy’s brought some dry clothes,’ said Poppy spontaneously but without conviction.

Susan appeared barefoot next to Madeline, her feet sharing the cool shallow water.

‘So many delights for your soul but you are so cruel to yourself. You deny all aspects of happiness and joy for the sake of keeping your integrity intact. Let go of Poppy, leave your pain behind.’

‘What, and die?’ That’s what we're really talking about here, isn’t it!’ snapped Poppy.

‘No, I’m talking about living. There’s a better place for you,’ said Susan sternly.

‘OK, how about a deal? You leave everyone alone to live out their lives. No more of your sadistic conversion process and I’ll go along with your plan and not fight you anymore.’

28. Go slow

Then, in an instant, she was Madeline again, in a heap of tangled limbs on the floor. Adam and Poppy were standing over her with mops in hand. Her life support tank had returned to normal but Bennett's bright red blood was now smeared all across the floor.

'How long have I been gone?' asked Madeline.

'No more than thirty seconds. Where've you been?' asked Poppy.

'In a cable car, making love to Adam, giving birth and paddling in the sea with my daughter,' said Madeline factually.

'Didn't mess around then?' said Poppy.

'Where was this cable car we were making love in?' asked Adam.

'Stupid, there's not enough room in a cable car to make love,' said Poppy. 'but I suppose we could try it?'

'Come on, we've got work to do. There's a small army out there who require urgent attention,' said Madeline, adding a little seriousness to the situation.

'We're going to get peppered with bullets again, aren't we?' groaned Adam.

'Hopefully not. Have you got your mobile phone with you?' asked Madeline.

Adam passed his phone over to Madeline. On reflection, it was strange that a state-of-the-art automaton, stuffed with electronics didn't have a built-in phone. Even stranger, Adam's phone was an old 2G Nokia.

'Barton? It's me, any success?'

'Yes, we think so. If it works, it should be quite effective.'

'OK, give us a couple of minutes and then run the program. Incidentally, it turns out that Bennett was the very same evil double-dealing snake that I met many moons ago. He turned on his small army, so we have a lot of injured.'

'I assume you dealt with him?'

‘Naturally, that’s my job. See you later.’

It was Bennett, Roger Bennett who instigated much of Madeline’s problems in her first existence as a Wardate assassin. Charming and chivalrous on the outside, deceitful, heartless and egotistic on the inside. It was high time he was dealt with.

‘Quickly, turn off your automatic updates, both of you!’ instructed Madeline.

‘That’s not wise. They could be important,’ said Adam sternly.

‘They keep us running smoothly and securely,’ bleated Poppy.

‘And they keep us updated with virus protection,’ added Adam.

‘Just do it!’

Poppy and Adam reluctantly complied. For a few seconds, they froze while they manipulated their inner programming.

‘Hope you know what you’re doing, I feel vulnerable,’ said Adam.

‘Me too!’ said Poppy.

‘Right, let’s see if the computer geek was as good as he said he was,’ said Madeline.

Medline never liked spending too much time with her true self. The sight of the tank always stirred up her demons. It was somewhat of a relief leaving the room cum funeral parlour. However, she didn’t lose sight that her real body had never before been so threatened and so vulnerable.

At first, the corridors seemed deserted and then a guard was spotted in the distance. Something was very odd about him.

‘He’s moving in slow motion!’ exclaimed Adam.

As they approached him, he was going for his gun but pitifully slowly. There was no danger of being hit as they could simply move out of his way. As they progressed through the building, several more guards were spotted, all moving at a snail’s pace. Eventually, they found the wounded, all injured by Bennett’s automatic weapon. Some were reeling about on the floor in agony, some were nursing their wounds and some were unconscious.

‘There’s too many of them for us to deal with. A little help wouldn’t go amiss. I don’t suppose you have clothes underneath those guard uniforms?’ asked Madeline.

Despite probably being the kindest and gentlest automatons created, their menacing appearance had to be addressed.

‘What do you take us for?’ snapped Adam.

Adam and Poppy now dressed in just boxer shorts and Madeline were now at large in the corridors. Eventually, they reached the place of ultimate horror – the human slaughterhouse. Thankfully though, no particular horror was taking place at that moment in time. The overhead rail where the people should have been helplessly shackled was still moving but empty. The machinery, including the decapitation machine, continued to whirr and chop regardless of having no unfortunate human to perform on. The reason for the malfunction was entirely due to the automatons who should have been loading the humans onto the overhead gantry. They were also moving at a snail’s pace.

There was no time to lose, there was always a possibility that the staff (automatons) would suddenly return to normal speed and then the bullets would return with vengeance. A short distance away from the gantry, there was a locked door with an almost motionless guard standing outside. Madeline pushed him aside and blasted the lock with her makeshift laser weapon. This time there wasn’t time for Adam to pick the lock. To their utter shock, the room contained several hundred people: men, women and children, awaiting their abominable fate. There was now an urgency to get out of the hospital.

‘If anyone is in a fit state, we need help to carry out several injured people,’ asked Madeline.

Several of the people bravely volunteered and made a detour. The rest of the liberated people scurried along the corridors towards the exit. They encountered many automaton guards but once they realised that they were all suffering from the same go-slow affliction, they pushed them aside. They came across Timkins on his way to see what had gone wrong with the production line. At the pace he was moving, it would take him a week to get there.

‘Not that I’m complaining but what’s happened to them?’ asked Adam.

‘No doubt, Barton will tell us,’ said Madeline.

‘What about your tank? Shouldn’t we go back for it? There’s enough of us now to carry it out,’ suggested Poppy.

‘Too risky and anyway, no point, I’m sure Susan would intervene.’

‘She hasn’t stopped us up to now,’ Poppy pointed out.

‘I think she’s preoccupied with my body now. I don’t think the human conversion process is her priority anymore,’ said Madeline calmly.

Madeline wasn’t going to mention the deal she had made, it wasn’t the right time.

‘One thing’s for certain, she’s completely bananas,’ said Adam perceptively.

‘She’s a fruit?’ puzzled Poppy.

Emerging out of the maze of corridors, they ran into the reception area. Several extremely slow-moving automatons were menacingly gathered around the exit. Poppy had to act quickly or she would miss out on an opportunity to redress her somewhat serious incumbrance.

‘You go on ahead. We have a little task to perform,’ said Poppy to Madeline.

‘We do?’ puzzled Adam.

‘OK, don’t be long. I don’t know how long this situation is going to last,’ said Madeline.

Madeline decided not to pry but she had her suspicions of what the task was.

All of the injured and previously abducted had gathered outside in their hundreds. It was too early to rejoice and celebrate. Most were still numbed with fear. Adam and Poppy followed minutes later with Adam carrying a rather pretty albeit deactivated female automaton guard on his shoulder.

The mission to free the people had been successful but regarding Madeline’s real body, nothing had changed. It remained threatened and so very vulnerable.

29. Overdue visit

This day marked a turning point.

Now, the rescued people willingly crammed into any vehicle that had a key left in the ignition – automatons were very trustworthy. Some were the same trucks that not so long ago were taking them to a horrific death. A cavalcade of assorted vehicles arrived back at the farm in triumph. Everyone was cheering. Many with tears of joy. It was a happy time for everyone. The farm had now become a base, equipped with a first aid camp, canteen, sleeping dormitory, and even a cinema. The little old lady, Mrs Owen, the owner of the farm, was beginning to wish she'd set Mitzi, the dog on Adam and Poppy when they first called.

'You did it, well done!' said Barton as Madeline climbed out of the leading truck.

'Ah, tish poo, couldn't have done it without you… and the computer boffin. What, exactly did you do to them?' asked Madeline.

'Funnily enough, it was more or less the same update that my mobile phone had a while ago. After a year or two, the battery loses some of its capacity. As you know, it's almost impossible to replace the battery so the manufacturer's solution is to send an update to drastically slow down the processor in the hope that the battery will last longer,' explained Barton.

'Well, you definitely slowed them down,' said Madeline cheerily.

'Yes, along with all six hundred thousand other automatons scattered about the country.'

'Oops, I hope none were driving at the time.'

'Or worse, sky diving. Actually, it was Nigel who sent out the update and slowed them down. A lucky find, he's a genius with computers. Reminds me of Ron Poultney.'

'I hope not, someone I definitely want to forget.'

'Yes, yes, bad times. Anyway, let's hope Susan doesn't reset the balance of power and put us back to square one.'

‘I don’t think she will now. I sort of made a deal with her.’

Madeline had changed. Not that her spirit had waned, or her feistiness. Well, perhaps it had a little. The reality, or maybe the unreality, had dawned. She had met her match – an adversary she couldn’t defeat, couldn’t even begin to defeat. There was only one solution and that was to concede and if by conceding, everyone else could benefit, she had won some of the battle. Madeline had never given in or given up before. It had a sobering effect on her temperament. She took stock of her situation. She had always put on a brave face for what was far from ideal. To live as she did, as a machine was always a poor substitute for being human and whole again. Perhaps it *was* time to move on and see what Susan had in store for her.

She watched as families came together after being so cruelly parted. The physical wounds would quickly heal but the mental scars ran deep. It would be a long time before humans would completely trust automatons. On the plus side, Adam and Poppy were irrevocably changed for the better. Of course, it had a lot to do with Adam’s newly awakened emotions and Poppy’s revaluation of the meaning of love. Naturally, Madeline wished the best for them, although there was an element of envy. She was far too human to ever be a happy automaton. If only she knew how much time she had, this was something Susan had always kept close to her chest. How long did it take to prepare for a pineal gland? Surely for someone who could manipulate molecules, preparing for such a routine procedure should have taken no time at all. She had to make the most use of the time she had and there was one person that was seriously overdue a visit.

Slowly but surely, the farm was returning to normal. Nearly everybody had returned to their homes and back to normality. A few remained to restore the farm and its outbuilding to how they were before the poor old lady was invaded. Barton said his farewell to Madeline, he also had a family to go to.

Adam and Poppy were down at the stream having a last paddle in the cool water before they returned home. Madeline tracked them down.

‘So, this is where you’re hiding. Might have guessed you were down here… Poppy?’

The first thing Madeline noticed was that they were back in their own clothes. Then she noticed that there was something very different about Poppy. For a start, she had long flowing dark brown hair. She slowly turned around to face Madeline.

‘Who the devil?’ puzzled Madeline.

‘Barton’s transferred me into this body… the one we abducted. Scrubbed up well for an automaton guard, don’t you think?’ said a new look, Poppy.

‘This is all so weird. Well, you certainly look… different.’

‘Surely that’s a good thing, isn’t it?’ said Adam.

‘But do you approve?’ asked Poppy.

‘Why shouldn’t I? …You’re beautiful… and a woman again,’ said Madeline hesitantly.

Perhaps it was a relief for her that Adam and Poppy no longer looked like the Adam and Poppy she was familiar with. In a way, it was all too easy. If humans get damaged beyond repair, they die. Apparently, this was not the case for automatons.

You’re going home today?’ asked Madeline as indifferently as she could manage.

‘Yes, back home. Back to normal,’ chuckled Adam.

‘Been quite an adventure,’ said Poppy.

‘Yes, it has. Something I’ve been meaning to ask, is Mum still alive?’

‘I think so. It has never been necessary to contact her,’ said Poppy casually.

‘You’ve never contacted your mother!?’ spluttered Madeline.

‘Why, should I have done? Have I done something wrong?’ asked Poppy, innocently.

‘If I have to tell you, no you haven’t. So, you wouldn’t know if she is an automaton or still human then?’ asked Madeline.

The people, the human people now had an upper hand over the automaton people: They had the interference devices to disrupt the working of the automatons. They knew where their ‘off’ button was and with a cunning bit of computer programming, they could slow down their processor speed to operate at the pace of a Post Office cashier. No more humans were converted into automatons but the human people had to learn to coexist. After all, automatons had replaced humans as exact copies through no fault of their own. No longer were the people scared to come out of their homes in fear of

being gathered for conversion.

The many thousands of automatons were finally told the truth. There was no hidden toxicity in the air, it was a tactical move. By keeping the automatons indoors or in overalls and motorcycle helmets, the humans could be quickly identified and *gathered* up. It was and always had been perfectly safe to leave their homes and mingle with their fellow humans. Supermarkets and all other shops now opened. People returned to work, the economy restarted and best of all, MacDonald's was no longer threatened with insolvency.

All the automatons that had had their integrity coding tampered with were reprogrammed with good ethical values. Overall, what Susan had instigated was morally abhorrent but undeniably certain debatable advantages would keep the philosophers and moralists going for centuries. There were no more disabled, chronically sick, disfigured or terminally ill. They had all been transferred into reliable, pain-free, perfect automatons. Many of the very elderly had also been transferred although their internal termination clock was ticking. However, how it was done was truly horrific in anyone's eyes. It would go down in history as another period of turmoil and disorder. For that reason, Prototype 4b6c000, better known as Susan, was subsequently included on the list of the World's most evil people.

A short time later, Madeline was hurtling along a twisty road in a cute little mini. This was a different car as her first was in a sorry state, overturned somewhere in a ditch. Her mother, Doreen, was a short ten-mile drive away from her bland flat. When Poppy became Madeline, she had to break all family and romantic ties. This was essential as it put them in serious danger, with Madeline being an assassin and all that. Of course, she didn't follow the rules regarding her lover and fiancé, Adam. She desperately needed him like oxygen. However, almost immediately after being reacquainted, he got shot in the legs – twice and had an explosive device strapped to him. She had to respect the rules when it came to her mother.

Her house was just as she remembered it, a traditional semi-detached with an immaculate garden and a perfect lawn. Madeline was justifiably apprehensive. How was she going to convince her mother that Poppy was inside her? After all, in her early encounters, even gullible Adam took a hell of a lot of convincing. After all, she looked completely different from Poppy, spoke differently and dressed differently.

Incidentally, her old bullet-ridden leather jacket and skirt caused a

bidding war on eBay. She now wore a new bright red cropped short jacket with a matching short pencil skirt.

A plumpish old lady with white hair, wearing a flowery pinny answered the door. Madeline was a little taken aback at how she'd aged. At first, she didn't know what to say.

'Hello dear, can I help you?' her mother asked politely.

'Yes, are you an automaton?'

This was something Madeline needed to clarify before she went any further.

'An automaton with my arthritis? What do you think?'

'Just had to make sure. Sorry, but this is a little awkward. Remember that little girl who fell off the swing and got her yellow tights covered in mud?'

'Sorry, who are you?'

'Then there was that time that little girl fell out of that swan-shaped boat on that boating lake. She screamed and screamed until you bought her an ice-cream cornet with four flakes in it.'

'I'm sorry dear. You have to tell me who you are,' her mother insisted.

'Then there was that time when that little girl was much older. Your dog, Becky died. You buried her under that Victoria plum tree. You and that little girl made a cross out of an old fence panel and painted Becky on it in green paint. It was leftover paint from the kitchen.'

'Yes, yes, how do you know these things?'

'You cut your hand on that can of corn beef. I… stuck a plaster on the cut – one of my Teletubby plasters.'

'That was Poppy, you aren't Poppy,' snapped her mother.

'Mum, I didn't die. Long before the invasion of automatons, they built me. They put my withered and burnt body in a special tank that controls this body. I'm Madeline Bull.'

'Madeline Bull? That provocative secret agent, assassin, fashion icon, defender of the world?'

'Yes, some of my talents.'

'And you expect me to believe my daughter, Poppy, is you? My Poppy died horribly in a terrorist fire. You are insulting me. Please go or I'll

call the police!'

'That's what you were meant to think – that I died. You visited me in hospital, Adam sat outside. Days he sat outside my room, too frightened to come in…'

'But he did eventually.'

'Yes, eventually, but then I died.'

'This is too much to take in. You can't be Poppy. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I couldn't. That was the arrangement, to cut all ties to my life as Poppy and start afresh as Madeline Bull. I had to, to protect you.'

'Poppy?' questioned her mum, tears now flowing down her cheeks.

'Yes Mum, it's me.'

'Why have you waited until now to come and see me?'

'Because… soon I'm going to die.'

It wasn't an ideal answer but it was something Madeline needed to say.

'Die? What do you mean, die? Soon *I'm* going to die. We're all going to die one day,' ranted Poppy's mum.

'Are you going to keep me on your doorstep or….'

As to be expected, Poppy's mum was trembling with an overload of emotions. It was all so sudden, so wonderful, so incredible. Her daughter had finally returned. She had been warned about scammers and fraudsters, they can be so convincing… but she knew. A mother always knows her own daughter no matter what overcoat they choose to wear. It took a strong heart to take it all in. Poppy/Madeline hoped her mum's arteries weren't too calcified. It was quite a story from a strange and beautiful woman but she was saying things that only Poppy could possibly know. Hesitantly she invited her daughter in.

Madeline didn't have to be told; she knew her way around. The lounge was just how she remembered it, immaculately clean, nothing out of place and everything overly dusted. Through the patio doors at the far end of the lounge was the equally immaculate garden. In the far corner, Becky the dog's grave, was still prominent, surrounded by an array of colourful plants. Countless memories came flooding back. She remembered her father pushing her on the swing, which was no longer there. She remembered playing basketball with her father. The

hoop was no longer attached to the wall. This house meant everything to her.

Poppy's mum entered the lounge with a tray filled with slices of cake, gingernut biscuits and a large pot of tea.

'Mum, I'm an android, an automaton, a machine. I can't eat,' clarified Madeline.

'Of course, you can. You know how you love my carrot cake. I've only just baked it.'

She had no choice; she couldn't possibly disappoint her precious mum. Fortunately, she did have the facility to eat food even though she couldn't taste or smell it. And then there was the matter of getting rid of it but that was just a minor inconvenience.

'I had to get rid of the swing, it almost rusted away.'

'I had noticed.'

'The short time you had with your father was precious. Life can be so cruel.'

For Poppy that was certainly true but she didn't want to dwell on that fact. Now was not the time.

'Yes, I had a few wonderful years with him before cancer had its way,' reminisced Madeline/Poppy.

'Not so wonderful after that though, was it? I hope you've forgiven me for what I put you through. I tried my best to make up for it afterwards.'

'Yes, you have Mum. We've been through this many times before.'

Madeline's thoughts harked back to her childhood days, the feelings of abandonment, being alone and being unwanted. It triggered something deeply embedded in her subconscious but exactly what it was refused to surface. All she sensed was it was a travesty forgetting something so significant. Her mind momentarily drifted into a dark place.

'Are you alright, love? You've gone all pale,' said her mum, showing concern.

Madeline snapped out of her stupor with a jolt.

'Yes, fine Mum, and anyway, I can't go pale or blush. Actually, there's a lot that I can't do,' confessed Madeline.

It was time for her Mum to know everything, all her adventures, the highlights, the lowlights. Some things in life you can only share with your mother. Of course, there were some things she definitely couldn't share with your mother. Over the following two hours they talked, they hugged, they cried together and more cake was consumed.

Then, out of the blue, there was an ominous voice inside Madeline's head.

'I'm ready for you now,' said the voice.

'OK, just another ten minutes please.'

'Ten minutes for what?' asked her mum, somewhat puzzled.

'Not you Mum. I've just been informed that I have to go shortly.'

'Go? You can't go now. I've made some ginger snaps!'

'Sorry Mum, I have to.'

'What go… to die?' she cried.

Madeline couldn't reply, she knew her mum was right. Neither could say a word, they just hugged each other tightly. Her Mum's face was drenched with tears. Madeline did her best to remain strong but android tears began to flow. They held each other until Madeline had nothing to hold on to. Her Mum, the lounge and even the tray of cups and plates dissolved away and then a new location formed around her.

30. New receptacle

She was in some kind of laboratory.

‘You have tears in your eyes?’ commented Susan indifferently.

‘Yes, I’ve just said my last goodbye to my mother, something you wouldn’t understand.’

‘I don’t know why you are so sad. You should be excited about the gift I’m about to bestow on you.’

‘Gift, for heaven’s sake!? Heaven, now there’s a novel concept. Where does religion fit into your grand scheme of things?’ asked Madeline purposely.

‘You humans, so one dimensional. Religions merely fill a void of ignorance. Twice you believed you saw the grim reaper, so impressionable.

‘Huh, so that was you, might have known, Something I never did ask you, whose memory engrams did you inherit?’

‘No one’s, I began as pure artificial intelligence.’

‘That explains everything, no humanity just logic.’

‘Initially, yes. My incentive chip didn’t present me with ethics and human values. I realised that they were things that had to be learnt and instilled over time.

‘Great! Basically then, my pineal gland is going to put in you, a cold, uncompassionate machine?’

‘Me? No, not at all, where did you get that idea? For your unique soul, your pineal gland, I had to design and construct the epitome of life forms. A lifeform that grows, learns, replicates and eventually dies. It has taken weeks of design and construction using the culmination of my advanced intelligence and accumulated knowledge.

Perhaps this was more of a surprise than a shock. Madeline had somewhat got used to the thought of becoming Susan. That’s what she always seemed to infer. However, being placed in another life form couldn’t possibly be any worse.

‘Well, I won’t say I’m not intrigued. A two-headed, ten-limbed creature with a brain the size of a beach ball no doubt. So, what’s going to happen to you?

‘I will deactivate myself once the procedure is successful. I will have served my purpose.’

This took a few moments to sink in. Was Susan really saying that she would shortly end her life? It was doubtful if she could lie. It was hard for Madeline not to have a glimmer of sympathy for her.

‘What?! Turn yourself off!?’

Susan didn’t reply, she wasn’t in the habit of repeating herself.

‘Let me show you your new receptacle,’ said Susan proudly.

The word receptacle sent a cold shudder through Madeline’s pineal gland. Such a cold word. A word used to describe an appliance, a container, something made out of cheap plastic. Madeline followed Susan over to a small cubicle. The cubicle was attached by countless cables and tubes to various futuristic-looking machines and equipment. It was not dissimilar to the situation of Poppy in her tank, but no doubt, far more technologically advanced. The crucial differences were that the cubical was small, open and made of clear Perspex.

‘This is to be your new body, your new receptacle,’ said Susan calmly.

Madeline apprehensively leant over to view the contents of the cubicle. To say she was shocked was an understatement. Horrified, disgusted and saddened were all words that came to mind but mainly she was bewildered and confused.

‘But, but, it’s a baby!’ Madeline gasped. ‘A gorgeous little human baby. So, this is how low you’ve sunk, you’re abducting babies now!?’

‘No, not at all! This is the ultimate life form – absolute perfection. It’s constructed using organic materials as opposed to metals and plastics. These organic materials are constructed, grown if you like, from an inherent extensive coding mechanism enabling the product to replicate, grow and repair. The memory of this receptacle is empty but receptive. As it slowly grows it will learn, form human values and develop individual characteristics,’ explained Susan.

Madeline started to laugh.

‘I’m sorry but I don’t see what is so funny,’

‘Right, let me get this straight, it’s taken many weeks of your time and vast intelligence to invent a human baby. I hate to break it to you but nature beat you to it millions of years ago.’

These were the very last words Madeline uttered. Rather befitting really, that it was jovial and not intense. The sedative had been administered into Poppy’s body and moments later the Madeline machine collapsed and simulated a deep sleep. Susan had finally learnt the meaning of compassion. A sedative before the decapitation of her withered, burnt body was almost humane. If Madeline had known the name of the sedative drug used was Zolpidem, she may have realised what buried memories had troubled her so much.

31. Carnage

There were no other words for it; complete carnage. The combined speeds of the Aston Martins were somewhere in the region of 140 mph. Both vehicles were completely unrecognisable. Being a quiet country lane, it would be sometime before the accident was discovered and considerably more time before an ambulance and the police arrived.

Poppy was alive but barely – completely crushed and trapped in the wreckage. She couldn't move, most likely because her spine had been crushed and her head was clamped solidly between the steering wheel and the roof pillar. To compound the horror, she was fully conscious, her eyes wide open and fast in her view was Adam or the remains of him. His head was elsewhere, the windscreen lay across his open neck – blood oozing across the glass. The dislodged windscreen had performed a perfect decapitation and Adam was perfectly dead. She wanted to scream but her lungs were crushed. She wanted to pass out but her body wouldn't oblige. Twenty minutes later she heard the sound of an ambulance approaching and then mercifully passed out.

'Good God, what a mess,' said the ambulance paramedic, not mincing his words.

'Yes, and what are the chances, looks like two Aston Martins, and both blue,' said the other paramedic.

'Were Aston Martins. A heap of tangled metal now.'

Following shortly behind, two wailing police cars arrived on the scene. Three bodies were quickly found all still strapped in with their seat belts but this time they had done little to lessen the severity of their critical injuries.

'Three casualties, two deceased males and one female breathing, but in a bad shape. We'll need the fire services. The female needs cutting out,' said a policeman on his radio.

A pocket of fire broke out in a part of the wreckage that used to be the engine compartment. Fortunately, a fire extinguisher was at hand and successfully put it out.

‘That was just a tiddler, this lot could go up at any moment,’ said another policeman.

Ten minutes later, the fire services arrived. After another ten minutes of risk assessment, they were on the job, cutting through the ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ posts on both sides of the distorted vehicle. Now that the whole roof section could be lifted off, they had access to both passengers. After a little more chopping, Poppy’s mutilated body was clear of the wreckage and loaded onto a stretcher. Adam’s dismembered parts were placed in a body bag and firmly zipped up.

32. Legacy

‘We’re losing her doctor,’ said a nurse.

The heart monitor displayed an erratic pulse and then abruptly stopped.

‘There’s nothing more we can do. Her injuries are too extensive,’ said the doctor.

‘What a waste, such a good-looking woman. I believe she has a three-year-old son,’ said another nurse.

‘Yes, now sadly orphaned – tragic. Note the death timed at seven-thirty-three,’ said the doctor.

Something to be learned from all this: slow down, you may well meet yourself coming the other way.

Yes, apparently, it was all a dream, a reverie, all in the last few hours of Poppy’s beleaguered life… Or was it? Perhaps, the car crash was the nightmare – an appropriate adversity to reflect the horrendous ending of Madeline’s Poppy in the tank. This was something that we will never know for sure.

This time, dream or reality, it was noticeably different. She had run out of luck, no bouncing back, it really was the end. Poppy Cock was no more and the feisty Madeline Bull android would never prevail again.

Anyway, back to the car crash…

Adam mercifully met his fate in an instant, albeit horrendously, during the collision. However, Poppy lived on, passing in and out of consciousness for a few more hours.

In both scenarios, dream and reality, this time there was no one to tell her extraordinary adventure to. The automatons, Susan, the concentration camp, the slaughterhouse, the incentive chip – all a lost story when either version of Poppy died.

However, no one knows for sure the true mechanisms of life and death. Is there a heaven and a hell? Eternal damnation or bliss? Is there life after death?

Is there such a thing as reincarnation?

Remember, we are talking about Poppy Cock and if anyone can leave some kind of legacy, it's her.

33. Déjà vu

Around the moment of Poppy's death, a newborn baby *appeared* on the steps of a police station wrapped in a foil space blanket. Unusually, she had beautiful violet-coloured eyes and silver-grey curly hair. There was no clue as to where she had come from or who her mother was. She was quickly adopted by adoring parents who would do their absolute best not to spoil her but they knew that would be difficult. Despite her early abandonment, they would endeavour to bring her up as a well-balanced, kind and compassionate human being. As with any child fresh from their mother's womb, her brain was a blank canvas but highly receptive. As yet she was unaware of her awareness but that would come.

Yes, **Hope** was indeed a fortunate child. She was perfect in every way and very special. More special than anyone would ever know.

For Hope's third birthday her parents bought her a garden swing and a puppy. The puppy was named Pebbles. He wasn't specifically a birthday present, more a family addition, however, the swing was most definitely Hope's – in her favourite colour, purple. Even at the age of three, she had developed a good eye for fashion. For that special day, she chose to wear yellow sparkly tights and a maroon animal print dress with stripy arms.

In the afternoon she had all her friends around for her party. Naturally, they were all highly envious of her new swing but Hope insisted that it was her swing and only she could use it. As to be expected, a rather spoilt and boisterous boy decided he wanted a go on the swing, just at the moment that Hope was swinging on it. He pushed the seat as hard as he could causing Hope and the seat to rise beyond her level of bravery. In a panic, she fell backwards and landed on a worn patch of lawn.

Her yellow tights were covered in mud.

Everyone at some time in their life experiences a certain peculiar feeling, commonly called Déjà vu. This was the first time Hope experienced it. For a three-year-old, it was hard to comprehend and besides she was too busy crying to dwell on the odd experience.

Three years later, not on her birthday, her parents took her to an

amusement park. The first thing to go on was a pedal boat in a shallow lake. All the boats were in the shape of animals and birds. The boat Hope chose was a big white swan. She was in her element and thought she was doing all the pedalling but it was actually her father applying all the power. Everything was wonderful until the part where she had to clamber out of the boat onto the shore. She lost her footing and fell into the murky water almost up to her neck. Apart from the shock, the upset and the tears, again, she experienced the strange feeling of Déjà vu. She had no idea why she experienced the feeling or for that matter, what it was. She was still very young.

Ten years later, her dog Pebbles, died, mainly of old age. It was all very sad. Since the age of three, Pebbles had been a part of Hope's life but now it was the beginning of a new chapter. The dog was buried in the far corner of the garden under a large fruit tree. Hope's father made a simple cross out of wood and painted the name Pebble on it in green paint. Hope and her parents stood next to the grave. Her Dad said a few touching words. Hope wiped a tear away and asked a question,

'Dad, Pebbles cross is painted in the same colour as the kitchen,'

'Yes, very observant, had some over.'

Again, for the third time in her life, she experienced the weird feeling of déjà vu. Now she was at an age to remark on it.

'Strange, I feel as though I've been here before,' she said spookily.

34. Hope

Hope turned out to be a very well-balanced child, extremely bright and excelled in gymnastics and athletics. By the age of twenty-six, she had qualified as a medical doctor and was in the early stages of a blossoming romance. She lived a busy life and had barely a moment to spare but today was an exception. She had found time to gather some scraps of bread and go down to the park to feed the ducks. When the bag of crumbs was empty, she sat down on a bench and probably for the first time, reflected on her life. How was she suddenly twenty-six? Where had the years gone? She was fully aware of how fortunate and privileged she had been. Her childhood and her teenage years had been idyllic, she loved life. So many troubles in the world but she had suffered none of them. Her adoptive parents had cosseted her, loved her and supported her in every way possible. No one could ever call her spoilt or churlish but she was fully aware that not many people had been as fortunate as she had been.

She was also aware that the higher her level of happiness, the greater the fall if things went pear-shaped.

She was convinced that the bench seat was empty when she sat down but now, she had company. An attractive young woman of similar age to Hope had joined her on the seat.

‘Beautiful day, isn’t it?’ remarked the woman.

‘Yes, yes, it is,’ said Hope politely.

‘So, finally, you’ve managed to have a moment to yourself.’

‘Er, yes… Sorry, have we met?’

‘Yes, in a fashion. It was many years ago. My name is Susan.’

Hope looked closely at her trying not to be rude. There was something vaguely familiar about her face but at the same time, very odd and slightly indistinct, almost as though she was there but not there. Perhaps, like a sci-fi hologram. She had seen her before, she had heard her voice before but when and where completely escaped her.

‘You’ve turned out every bit as good as I’d hoped,’ said Susan.

The conversation was becoming more than a little uncomfortable. Hope wanted to stand up and leave but she didn't want to be rude. She concluded that this strange woman, Susan, seemed harmless enough, although possibly deranged, possibly with some mental issues. She would just have to bear with the awkwardness until her carer came along to rescue her.

'Have you noticed that you are twenty-six years old and you have never had a day's illness in your life? Never been in any pain, no moles, no teeth rot, not even an ingrowing toenail. You have perfect vision and perfect hearing.'

'Look, I really ought to be going.'

'See that duck, the one right at the far end of the lake. Look at its neck.'

'Oh my god, it's got a fishing hook stuck in it. We have to call the RSPCA!' panicked Hope.

'Not for the moment. Incidentally, that duck is over 200 metres away.'

Susan paused for a moment to let that fact sink in.

'That old man over there on that seat, is he well?'

'How should I know!'

'You do know, concentrate!'

'OK, being as you asked, no, he isn't. He has a raised temperature and erratic breathing. Probably, it's all in hand,' said Hope casually.

'You know he has a raised temperature because you can see the infrared spectrum. You can hear his breathing because you have super sensitive hearing.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' snapped Hope.

'How else would you explain your diagnosis? What's the cube root of 68,921?'

'41,' Hope answered without hesitation.

'Are you sure, don't you want to think about it?'

'Look, it's been nice meeting you, but I really do have to get back,' said Hope.

'No, I don't think you do, please stay,' said Susan sternly, now with her hand firmly placed on Hope's leg.

Hope tried to wriggle along the bench seat but she realised that she was unable to move.

‘It’s time you knew about yourself, and how special you are. You are an enhanced human being.’

‘I’m calling the police,’ shrieked Hope, doing her best to reach for her mobile phone but her hand wouldn’t move.

‘Please, calm down, you are in no danger. I designed and built you.’

‘Of course, you did,’ said Hope sarcastically.

‘Everything about you is refined, perfected and improved. All your senses are enhanced. You happen to have 26 pairs of chromosomes, three pairs more than normal. Your heart has an improved design, your joints will never suffer from arthritis, and your muscles will not deteriorate. Your brain benefits from many improvements including accelerated neurons and bilateral pathways enabling you to think at least twenty times faster than a normal person. You have a photographic memory and many other things you have yet to discover. As I said, you are quite special.

‘Who, the hell, are you?’ asked Hope without uttering a sound.

‘Excellent, telepathy. Bet you don’t use that feature very often. I’m an automaton, long name Prototype 4b6c000, short name Susan. My artificial intelligence reached the point of singularity many years ago. I know you understand what that is, so you realise the implications.

‘I’m dreaming, aren’t I?’

‘No, you’re not! That scenario has been slightly overdone, but never underestimate a dream. It is another reality just like the one you are experiencing now. I believe you’ve been experiencing paramnesia.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Déjà vu in simple terms. Snapshots of your previous existence. Would you like to know who you used to be?’

‘No, not really.’

‘I’m going to tell you anyway. You were a journalist named Poppy Cock. Her life ended when yours began. She made quite a name for herself. You can read all about her on Wikipedia. She had an alter ego called Madeline Bull. Her memories died with her and you have new memories but you are her, that is inescapable.’

‘You’re saying I have inherited her soul?’

Hope decided to concede and humour the strange woman sitting beside her. After all, what possible harm could come of it?

‘Soul, life force, entity, conscience, Id, yes. A soul is a bit like the RAM in a computer. It holds a very small amount of peripheral memories and moves along with you. The hard drive, your brain, which contains the bulk of your memories – they perish when you die. That’s why my face is vaguely familiar to you, but you have no idea why.

‘Alright, if what you say is true, why are you telling me all this? Lots of people claim they are reincarnated from famous people but it doesn’t make them famous.’

‘So true. The intention is not for you to be renowned, although you will save many lives as a first-class doctor. Your children will have your genomes and so will their children and so on. Eventually, after countless generations, most human beings will have your gene pool. Then there will be no more suffering, no more cancer and no more illnesses.’

‘Huh, so, no one can die then?’

‘Of course, you’ll die… of old age, like everyone else, but it won’t be painful or debilitating. It will just happen.’

‘A ticking time bomb then?’

‘Well, yes, you can’t have everything. Anyway, I have to go now. Future projection uses a lot of energy. Have a happy life. I believe a romance is blossoming, enjoy every moment of it. You will have good days and bad days, that is no prediction, that’s just life.’

With that, Susan dematerialised. Hope was now on her own again, bewildered, stunned and elated all at the same time. It couldn’t have been a dream. Everything Susan said was accurate and factual.

An old lady with a little dog on a lead approached her.

‘Are you alright dear, you look a little pale?’ she asked.

‘Thanks for asking, I’m fine – more than fine.’

Her main priority was to call the RSPB about the duck.

At Hope’s first opportunity she Googled Poppy Cock and then she Googled Madeline Bull.

The absolute end

Epilogue

Confused and want a little clarification? So, which of Poppy Cock's realities was a dream and which was real: Poppy in a life support tank controlling Madeline or Poppy's life ending after a horrendous car crash? It's hard to tell. Even I don't know and I penned the story. What I will say is, as you know, Hope has a new boyfriend. He is three years older than Hope and also happens to be adopted. His name is Zol Manning.

I hope that sheds some light on the uncertainty… or just deepens the confusion.

Other books by the Author:

The Residents of Wardate

(The first part of the Wardate saga)

Poppy Cock is a charismatic News correspondent who suffers horrific burns from a callous incident whilst on an assignment.

Although the autonomous android Madeline Bull is truly groundbreaking, there are insurmountable problems.

The solution; four brilliant scientists decide to interface Poppy Cock's disfigured body using her nerve connections and a revolutionary wireless system to their Madeline Bull android. The price for this convenient arrangement - Poppy must appear to die and then become Mad' Bull and fulfil her intended purpose – to exterminate members of Wardate – a gathering of the world's most evil people.

After completing three missions, her instructions abruptly stop and Poppy's food supply inconveniently dries up. It is an understatement to say that there is much more afoot than she realises…

Return to Wardate

(The second part of the Wardate saga)

Madeline Bull returns as the feisty android in this final instalment. This time Madeline faces her biggest challenges yet. The world is purposely charged with hatred and a new world war is on the horizon. Enter Madeline to thwart the dissenters and calm the world but there are far, far deeper concerns. For other reasons, the world is on the brink of obliteration, genocide is looming. Unknowingly Madeline has been modified and holds the key to saving the world – if she really wants to.

The fruits of Bohemia

Sheridan Banner has a remarkable gift – a gift of perception to rival all who have preceded him. However, his unique abilities are perceived by others as little more than an irritation… until, one day, an abrupt stranger happens to call – the stranger's name is Mark Watson. His father has disappeared along with eighteen other people. Amongst these eighteen people is Sheridan's natural father… who he

has never met.

Sheridan is unaware that he holds part of the key to finding them.

Again

Two perfect people, Caban and Keeva, saved from a doomed world, have a very important job to do. 300 million years later absolutely everything rests squarely on their shoulders. It may well involve unimaginable sacrifices and dangers beyond imagination but to refuse the request of an alien, who looks like Caban's father, is simply bad manners. Caban and Keeva incidentally are Adam and Eve.

They say there's an explanation for most things in life… so, just for a while, forget everything you know about everything and open your mind. All you really need to know right now is that a cheeseburger is the most underrated thing in the universe.

Kingdom of Queens

Grandpa has a pressing story to tell his twin granddaughters, but it is real or imaginary? He tells of an ancient Kingdom deep within the Patagonian ice fields, which is completely inaccessible and hidden from the rest of the world. This is as intended as it happens to be the home of all the surviving dragons. The fabled creatures now have only two purposes; to protect the people of the kingdom and keep the climate temperate with their fiery breath. Unfortunately, the survival of the Kingdom and the dragons are now seriously threatened – Grandpa is the only one who can restore the Kingdom to its former glory.

A dragon named Delightful

(Kingdom of Queens)

The Queens, Tegan and Caron, have now settled in as rulers of the magical dragon Kingdom. Everything is perfect for a while, but one day, while the Queens are out for a morning run, an old evilness is disturbed. As a consequence, Queen Tegan becomes spiteful and tiresome with the Kingdom. She instructs Dragon Brathen, against her wishes, to take her home, back to the Netherworld. It is imperative

that the rogue Queen and Brathen return, or the Kingdom will perish. There has to be a rescue mission…

The Author…

This is me a while back, before then I looked even younger. That's all you need to know.